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Buffalo Bill at Wounded Knee

OR,

THE BATTLE-SECRET OF THE BAD LANDS.

BY W. B. LAWSON.



BUFFALO BILL PERCEIVED CHIEF TWO STRIKE ON THE SUMMIT OF THE ROCKS.

BUFFALO BILL AND THE HOSTILE, LOCKED IN A DEATH GRAPPLE, LANDED SQUARELY IN THE DYING CAMP-FIRE.

Buffalo Bill at Wounded Knee;

OR,

THE BATTLE-SECRET OF THE BAD LANDS.

By W. B. LAWSON.

CHAPTER I.

THE SUMMONS TO THE FIELD.

Two horsemen were spurring over the rough Nebraska plains between Rushville and the Pine Ridge Indian Agency, on a cold, blustering Monday forenoon, next preceding New Year's Day, 1891, in the very heart of the recent Indian disturbances in South-western Dakota and the Bad Lands.

"D'ye think we'll reach ther Ridge in time ter prevent a collision between the military and Big Foot's band, on ther Wounded Knee, Bill?" asked the shorter and thicker-set of the two horsemen, the celebrated Nebraska scout, Buckskin Jack Russell, by name and sobriquet.

"We can only do our best," replied his companion, bending his head to the cold north-west blast as he rode, for there was now snow in the air, with indications of worse to come. "I fear that Two-Strike may not have been able to communicate his commands to Big Foot, in accordance with his promise to me, in which case we may be too late to prevent a battle. But we can only hope for the best."

The last speaker was a man of singularly noble and picturesque presence—long-haired, eagle-eyed, stern and handsome-visaged, an athletic frame, perfectly and splendidly equipped in accordance with the exigencies of the occasion. In fact, in mien, garb, and speech, he was the beau-ideal of the daring far-West scout, but no longer in his youth, and with the indications of a world-wide experience and observation in his traits and bearing. He was the far-famed Colonel Cody, or Buffalo Bill, of both realism and romance, the matchless army scout no less than the original proprietor of Wild West shows at home and abroad, once more back on one of his old stamping-grounds at the call of duty and inclination, as the camp-fires (which might at any moment become battle-fires) of the latest troubles with the Indians flashed luridly throughout the land from that wild and obscure corner of South-western Dakota.

The two men were riding abreast over a wild, little frequented trail, the desolate wilderness before, around, and behind them partly covered with snow.

Buckskin Jack looked at his companion with a peculiarly curious and inquisitive stare.

"Colonel," said he, "no 'one seems ter make ye out. Ye air a sort er mystery 'ith ther army men, an' all ther rest of 'em."

"I don't mean to be, Jack," was the quiet response. "What is it they can't understand about me?"

"Your private 'pinion on ther Injun question—whether ye be 'ith ther army men 'r ther reds in your sympathies."

"There should be no doubt about me whatever in that respect, old fellow," observed Buffalo Bill, earnestly. "The hostiles are certainly not without their grievous wrongs in their present attitude, though such wrongs as the military authorities are in no wise responsible for. I would merely save them from their own madness—from the exterminating measures that must ensue should they precipitate a general Indian war. There you are, in a nutshell, Buckskin."

"An' arter they're once fairly under subjection, colonel, what next, so ez these hyar troubles 'll never come agin?"

"Their entire, undivided control by the army authorities," promptly, "without any civil or political interference whatever."

"Good fer you, colonel!" cried Buckskin Jack. "I've never yet seed a true army man, officer or private, who didn't pity the redskins fer ther cruel wrongs thet hev so often goaded 'em ter frenzy, even while puttin' out ther iron hand to keep 'em within bounds. But, hullo! Look ahead, colonel."

A solitary horseman had suddenly appeared on the bleak trail, a couple of miles ahead, as if awaiting their approach.

"It's one of Yankton Charley's half-breed scouts," said Cody. "He may have news for us from Wounded Knee!" And both men spurred on at a shaper pace, while the waiting horseman signaled with his hand.

"You're right, colonel—it's Louis Ramean, ther half-breed, an' ez good a scout ez ever flung a leg over a horse's back," cried Buckskin, and so it proved.

The solitary scout—an athletic fellow, half Indian, half soldier in garb and bearing—stood out motionlessly against the sky for

a moment, and then came galloping to meet the pair in a whirl of dust and snow.

"What's the news, Louis?" demanded Buffalo Bill.

"Ther battle 'ith Big Foot's on, colonel," was the laconic response.

"What! at Wounded Knee?"

"Yes; I'm on my way ter ther Ridge with ther news of it. Firin' had jest begun."

"What brought it on?"

"A fool-buck firin' a single shot. Then all ther reds opened on us, 'thout a second's warnin', an' ther soldiers hed ter wade inter 'em on a punishin' scale."

"You are going to the Agency now?"

"Yes."

"You know the wealthy lady, Mrs. Jernyngham, stopping there?"

"As is so anxious 'bout Miss Delmar, the young lady thet ran off 'ith Big Knife?"

"Or was carried off by him—yes."

"All right, colonel."

"I wish you would say to Mrs. Jernyngham from me that my call upon her must be deferred until this evening."

"Is that all, colonel? Nothing about ther young lady yet?"

"Nothing—that is all."

Ramean waved his hand, and rode away to the eastward, while Cody and his companion dashed off in the opposite direction toward Wounded Knee Creek.

Deep as was Buffalo Bill's chagrin at what he had heard, he gave no expression to it in words, though Buckskin Jack was less reticent on the subject.

"It's too infernally bad!" exclaimed the latter. "Of course, thar'll be nothin' left fer the troops but ter wipe out Big Foot's hull band, in sheer self-defense; an' then—holly smoke! ther hull Bad Lands'll like enough be in a red-hot blaze of Injun warfare!"

"Not if I can reach Two-Strike in time to prevent it," was the collected response. "Ha! there is the firing at last!"

"True ez ye live, colonel. Ther scream o' them Hotchkiss shells is mighty unpleasant, even at this distance, an' thet rattle o' musketry sounds like murderin' business."

The unfortunate slaughter of Big Foot's band, as precipitated by the Indians themselves at Wounded Knee Creek, is a matter of too recent newspaper history to require a detailed or circumstantial description here.

When the great scout and his companion reached the top of an eminence that commanded the scene, the carnage was at its height.

The cavalry troops under Major Whiteside's immediate command were hotly engaged with the infuriated hostiles, in open ground, just beyond the latter's tepees; the Ninth Cavalry, under General Forsyth, some dismounted, others in the saddle, were being hurried to their support; Lieutenant Taylor's Indian scouts, whose search of the tepees for concealed arms had prompted the unfortunate opening shot, were in hot pursuit of a mob of fugitives toward the coulees and ravines to the northward.

The Hotchkiss and Gatling guns were getting in their deadly work from neighboring hill-tops; shells were screaming in their flight, bullets raining like hail, shifting wreaths and puff-clouds of powder-smoke obscured or disclosed the field by turns; and war was everywhere—war in miniature, perhaps, but none the less pitiless, bloody and devastating in all its features.

"Look out for Captain George Wallace, of Troop K," said Buffalo Bill, as they paused a moment to breathe their horses before galloping down to join in this scene of hell unloosed on earth. "It is Custer's old regiment, the Seventh, you know, that was nearly wiped out at the Little Big Horn, nearly fifteen years ago. And gallant Captain George had a premonition, I have heard, that there was fresh misfortune in store for his troop."

"There he is!" cried Buckskin Jack at last, pointing with his hand. "See! he is leading that charge to the left, and—good Lord! they're now in the very swirl of that mob of red devils. By Jupiter! they'll be rubbed out, Bill."

"Not if I can help it. I see. Come on, Buckskin!"

Then they dashed down the hill and into the battle at a break-neck gait.

"Mercy's out of date just now, Buckskin," called out the old prince of plainsmen, cool as a cucumber, though letting out right and left with a revolver in each hand, and with no diminution of his headlong speed. "Let 'em have it while you can."

"Don't fear for me, colonel!" shouted Buckskin Jack, in response, imitating his chief's example with almost equal brilliancy and effect. "I'm with ye while thar's a hair on me hide!"

They kept together even amid the confusion through which

they dashed, while the troops sent up a congratulatory cheer. Then, as the two scouts were spurring directly toward the spot where Captain Wallace had last been seen, a yet fiercer cheer of welcome—a cheer with something savage, something of the Indian yell, in it—greeted them from a body of mounted Indians in Uncle Sam's regulation blue, on their right.

It was from Lieutenant Taylor's loyal Indian scouts, together with some Indian policemen, who were charging in pursuit of a fresh lot of fugitives toward the north side of the bloody field.

"Quick, Bill!" roared out Buckskin, a moment later. "That's Captain George still in the saddle, and—no, he's down at last, by G—!"

But Buffalo Bill's horse at this critical juncture went down under him, with a bullet in its neck.

However, as he sprang lightly to the ground, Buckskin reached out his hand, which was instantly grasped, and, thus assisted, the grand old scout sprinted along on foot at his mounted companion's side.

Then they were in the very midst of the bloody melee, which had been their objective point, and it was each man for himself, with Winchester or revolver, as the case might be.

A moment later, Buffalo Bill sprang upon a riderless pony, and with the faithful Buckskin still at his side, dashed headlong among the now panic-stricken hostiles, straight for the spot where the gallant *beau sabreur* of the Seventh had been seen to go down.

Too late!

The Little Big Horn was avenged, with the running hostiles, braves, and squaws—for as both sexes were garbed alike and equally belligerent, there could be no discrimination made—being cut and shot down in every direction by the frenzied troopers, but Captain Wallace had already met his fate.

He was dead on his back, beside his stricken horse, and amid a circle of his foemen slain—quite dead from a tomahawk blow, squarely received in the center of the forehead.

"It was the fate he would doubtless have chosen for himself, if needs must—a soldier's death, in the performance of his duty, and at the head of his charging troop!" commented the great scout, when regretfully contemplating the unfortunate officer's remains, a little later on. "True friend, gallant soldier! one might truly say of you, as is said in Shakespeare, over the remains of the great Hotspur, 'this earth that bears thee dead bears not alive so stout a gentleman!'"

After this lamentable episode, the fight or battle, if such it can be called, was little more than a running slaughter and murderous pursuit of the miserable savages at the hands of the troopers.

Of the latter thirty-six, all told, were slain, as the result of that bloody day, or subsequently died of their wounds; while the fatalities among the Indians doubtless numbered, sooner or later, over two hundred.

When the affair was over, except for a desultory pursuit that was being continued here and there, Buffalo Bill and Buckskin Jack, having procured desirable fresh mounts, were about setting off for Pine Ridge, without further delay, when they paused to take leave of General Forsyth and his officers.

On the general asking the old scout what effect he thought the battle would have upon the gathering bands of hostiles and semi-hostiles in the abstract, Colonel Cody grew very grave.

"Bad, general, bad!" he replied, thoughtfully. "The actual hostiles will doubtless be excited to additional frenzy, while the effect upon the wavering friendlies may be even more unfortunate in determining them to join hands with those in open defiance. In fact, I don't see how it can well be otherwise; though I shall speedily have an opportunity of judging by personal observation."

"You don't mean to say, colonel, that you intend venturing into the Bad Lands on your own responsibility, and at this critical state of affairs?" said General Forsyth, in surprise.

"Yes; by to-morrow, perhaps; or, at all events, soon after I have conferred with General Miles and General Brooke at Pine Ridge, whither I am going now, accompanied by my old friend, Buckskin, here."

The officer shook his head; though presently his anxious face brightened up.

"Is it on that quest for the runaway young lady which Mrs. Jernyngham is so interested in?" he inquired, taking the scout to one side.

"Yes," was the reply; "though my principal affair shall be with Two-Strike, in a last attempt to persuade him to come back peaceably to the Agency, with his people."

"A risky mission, Colonel Cody; almost a desperate one at this crisis, I should say."

"But a risk that must, nevertheless, be taken by some one, in the general interest of peace and security to the settlers; and

why not by me as well as by some one else perhaps less fitted for the service?"

"If any one can succeed in such a mission, it must be yourself, colonel. Still your secret power over Sitting Bull was not exerted to save that chieftain and his followers to the Agency. Why should the secret power, which you are also credited with holding over Two-Strike, be of any more avail?"

The general accompanied these words with a keenly inquisitive glance, but the veteran scout's face remained immovable.

"Thanks for your solicitude, general," said Buffalo Bill; "but I must be off now."

"Why not wait till to-morrow, when my whole command here will be falling back on the Agency?" persisted the officer. "You two men will even now incur a tremendous risk in merely riding back to the Ridge alone."

"Buckskin and I are in the habit of taking our chances, general."

"One moment. Do you think that Mrs. Jernyngham's niece accompanied Big Knife's flight of her own will and inclination?"

"Most decidedly I do not, sir!" exclaimed the great scout, energetically. "Certain of the chief's kinspeople who have remained behind among the friendlies, have industriously sought to make the young lady's disappearance have that significance, but I have every reason to believe that she was forcibly abducted. There is, besides, another very good reason to that effect."

"What is that, if it is an open question?"

"Miss Delmar was affianced to a certain young gentleman, in every way worthy of her, before quitting the East on this ill-judged missionary tour. Mrs. Jernyngham, her aunt, is expecting to be joined by the young gentleman at almost any hour, and he will doubtless accompany me on my quest into the Bad Lands—should I deem him fit to share the perils and hardships of such an expedition?"

"Ah, a good enough vindication of Miss Delmar's taste certainly, and I am glad of it. Who else will accompany you, besides Buckskin Jack Russell?"

"Yankton Charley, the scout, and Red Tomahawk, the Indian policeman, should they reach the Agency in time. At present, both are already in, or on their way out of the Bad Lands. Otherwise, we shall make the undertaking without them."

Ten minutes later, when the two scouts, by no means unwilling to leave that groaning, corpse-strewn field far behind them, were spurring briskly away toward Pine Ridge, amid whirling snowflakes and other indications of a severe blizzard in prospect, a single horseman was seen signaling them as he came on swiftly to intercept them from the north-west.

"It is Yankton Charley," said Buffalo Bill, after inspecting the new-comer through his field-glass. "Let us join him at once."

This was accordingly done, and the three scouts rode on together.

Yankton Charley, also a veteran scout, was just out of a perilous mission in the heart of the hostile region, and he looked it, too.

CHAPTER II.

MRS. JERNYNGHAM.

"Have you heard of the affair at Wounded Knee, Charley?" was Buffalo Bill's first question of the new arrival.

Yankton Charley was as dark as a half-breed, if not really one, and, moreover, with the general aspect of a born hunter scout, tough, wiry, reticent—a man of few words, and uncertain temper, with the eye of an eagle and the jaws of a mastiff.

"Yes, Big Chief Bill," he replied, in an odd, jerky, Indian-like way of speaking that he had. "Ugh! should say so. Met some fighters on my way up out of Les Mauvaises Terres, three hours ago. Stampeded panthers, and such a mob of 'em! Look at that!" And he pointed to a scratch on his pony's neck, and the half of an Indian arrow still sticking through the stirrup-leather, which it had penetrated before snapping off, as indications of the dangers he had passed through.

"That does look like business, Yankton!" commented Buckskin Jack, with a responsive grunt almost as Indian-like as the one that evoked it.

Yankton had gone scouting individually into the Bad Lands three days previously, partly on public service and partly on Buffalo Bill's private account. The region there was fairly teeming with hostiles, who were daily receiving additions to their number from the disaffected among the so-called friendlies round about Pine Ridge and elsewhere. Their chief camp was a fortified village, under the redoubtable Two-Strike's general command, on a lofty rock-girt and practically inaccessible plateau in the very core of the Bad Lands. All were of fierce and warlike temper,

which would probably be roused to a frenzied pitch by the news of the affair at Wounded Knee. And, in the scout's opinion, nothing short of a signal defeat in a great pitched battle would ever dislodge them thence; if, indeed, they should not take the initiative by a combined attack on the military at Pine Ridge itself. The scout had succeeded in discovering that the missing young lady was held, as a virtual prisoner, by her admirer and captor, Big Knife, one of the most warlike and dangerous young Brule chiefs under Two-Strike's leadership, with a number of squaws, in a large tepee, or wigwam, some two miles back of the great hostile village, in the most difficult part of the elevated, rock-battlemented plateau. More than this he had not been able to find out, and he had only at last succeeded in making his escape out of the enemy-infested Bad Lands after many perilous adventures and trying hardships, or, as the slang but graphic saying goes, by the skin of his teeth. Such was the substance of Yankton Charley's report to Buffalo Bill, delivered at much greater length in his odd way, and elicited by many questionings.

"Discouraging enough, but might be worse," was the great scout's general comment upon this rather lugubrious batch of intelligence; and then came another question, on a somewhat different line: "What luck has Red Tomahawk had? Have you seen or heard anything of him?"

Yes; the messenger out of the Bad Lands should say he had, though chiefly indirectly, and by hearsay.

Red Tomahawk (or Tubbakootuck) was a brave Ogallala Indian policeman, who had participated prominently in and survived the bloody fight attendant upon the capture and death of the great Sioux medicine-man, old Sitting Bull, two weeks previously. He had now been absent several days on a secret mission into the hostile country involving interests no less delicate than dangerous, and his return thence was awaited with no little anxiety by Buffalo Bill, who not only held the policeman in great personal esteem, but was desirous of associating him with the hazardous undertaking which he himself was now contemplating.

"Red Hatchet has got aaway with the young lady he was in search of," explained Yankton Charley, at last, "but he is now making tracks back for the Bad Lands. In fact, colonel, I saw him but two or three hours ago, and advised him to take that course. Here is a bit of writing for you," handing over a slip of paper. "It was given me by that young chap, Mr. Jackford, who is with Tubbakootuck and the young gal, Sitting Bull's adopted daughter, whom they have succeeded thus far in rescuing."

Buffalo Bill tore open the missive, and hastily scanned its contents.

"Aha!" he exclaimed, half to himself. "This is a description of their secret retreat, where they will doubtless have to remain pending a rescue. This will have to be attended to without delay, but, instead of interrupting, may only serve as an accessory to my own private affair over there in Les Mauvaises Terres. But we shall see."

He thrust the paper into the bosom of his hunting jacket, and then, notwithstanding that but little let-up had been made in their vigorous march, they spurred their steeds at a yet livelier pace, on over the frozen wastes and through the whirling snow.

"It's luck for me thet I stole a fresh mount jest afore gittin' out o' ther Bad Lands," observed Yankton Charley, after a goodly number of their eighteen miles of journey had been covered, and when the wintry dusk was beginning to gather down over the desolate scene. "Otherwise, I'd hev a mighty small show of keepin' up with them nags o' yourn an' Buckshot's, colonel."

"These hyar brutes didn't cost us no more than yourn did you, Yankton, I'm bettin' on it," Buckskin Jack took it upon himself to answer. "An' I'm also bettin' thet they're the prize ponies of Big Foot's herd."

The words were hardly out of his mouth when there was the crack of a rifle from not far away, and one of the animals whom he thus vaunted—the one that he himself bestrode—fell dead in his tracks, with a bullet in his brain.

"An ambushade!" exclaimed Buffalo Bill, instantly pulling up, and taking in the situation with his wonderful presence of mind. "Down with you, and then to cover!"

He was out of the saddle, and behind his own prostrate horse, almost before the words were spoken—his companions, obedient to the same instinct, following his example on the instant.

Then there was the simultaneous crack of their three Winchester's, and, out of four mounted Indians, hideous in their war paint, who started, with a yell, into view from behind some neighboring rocks, two toppled, dead, out of their saddles, while the remaining two galloped off, with a parting whoop of disappointed rage, and with one of the riderless steeds in leading.

"My shot was for the smoke-puff that marked the one that gave us the tip," quietly observed Buffalo Bill, indicating an

isolated rock not far away. "Those other rascals were a little too hasty in disclosing themselves, or they might have had our scalps at their belts. Let us investigate."

This was accordingly done, with due precaution. The veteran scout's bullet had told, no less than those of his companions. Behind the rock indicated, the firer of the initial shot, a brawny Brule warrior in full war paint, was found, stone dead, shot through the head, his rifle still tightly grasped, his pony, a miserable brute, completely winded, in concealment close at hand.

After Buckskin had availed himself of the other captured pony to replace his own, the trio pushed on their way, and finally reached the Agency without any further interruption.

A little later on, when he had had some supper and made himself presentable, Buffalo Bill called upon Mrs. Jernyngham, who was stopping at the house of the principal store-keeper, or trader.

"I received your message by Mr. Rameau, sir," said the lady, giving him her hand. "Ah, it is all true, then, sir—this terrible news of the battle with Big Foot's Indians?"

Mrs. Jernyngham was a nobly handsome and dignified lady of more than middle age, whose elegant and refined presence seemed singularly out of place in its present surroundings.

A few months previous, her niece and ward, Miss Blanche Delmar, a young lady of much beauty and varied accomplishments, but of somewhat inconveniently quixotic tendencies, had come to the Agency, with several other ladies of like inexperience and inclinations, for the purpose of personally inquiring into the condition of the Indian children at the Government and mission schools. Her associates in this laudably philanthropic inquiry had speedily tired of their self-imposed task, and returned to their more congenial spheres. Miss Delmar had remained. Shortly before the opening of our story she had disappeared. Various coincidences had led to an impression that she had accompanied Big Knife, a handsome and partly educated young chief, in his flight to join, with his family and personal following, Two Strike's growing force of hostiles and discontents in the Bad Lands. But this impression was not shared by all. There were those who felt certain that the young lady's interest in the young chief (which had given rise to the rumor alike discreditable to her taste and reputation) had been of a purely educational or platonic character, and that she was far more likely to have been forcibly abducted while on a visit to Big Knife's squaw-relatives in one of his large tepees just prior to his flight.

The former and more prevalent impression had been industriously fostered by such of the chief's relatives as remained at the Agency, doubtless because of a certain reflected importance which it gave them, by reason of the missing lady's wealth, beauty, and social position. The latter opinion was shared by the best society, military and otherwise, at the post.

Hence Mrs. Jernyngham's presence there, and the profoundly anxious interest she was manifesting to ascertain the truth, together with the concomitant elements of the situation, as have already been hinted at.

"It's all true about the battle at Wounded Knee, ma'am," replied the great scout. "I witnessed it myself—a terrible affair. But let us not talk of that now," reassuringly, "as I'm quite certain that the affair can in no case make the situation worse for Miss Delmar in her captivity."

The lady's face brightened. It was pleasant to have him speak so matter-of-factly of her niece's captivity; and when he went on to tell her the substance of the report brought in by Yankton Charley from the Bad Lands, with regard to Miss Delmar's undoubted forcible detention in the vicinity of Two-Strike's hostile village, the good lady's sense of relief was good to see.

"I have known and felt it from the start, Mr. Cody!" she exclaimed. "But then my niece's reputation can only be thoroughly and permanently vindicated by her rescue out of her present unfortunate predicament at the earliest possible moment. And that any one," indignantly, "should have dared to suspect a young lady of Blanche Delmar's intelligence and breeding to have gone off there in that murder-haunted wilderness of her own inclination—to have felt an attachment for a—a red savage—a common Indian!"

"Not to be thought of for a minute, ma'am," said the scout, soothingly. "But—er—this Big Knife isn't altogether a common Indian, you see."

"No?" in surprise.

"Well, no, ma'am. He's a chief of no little consequence in his tribe, besides having remained true to his promises and obligations until quite recently. And Big Knife is, moreover, I must confess, one of the handsomest, noblest specimens of the red race I ever encountered."

"That is no difference to me, so long as he is an Indian," observed Mrs. Jernyngham, with angry impatience. "The mention of his absurd name in connection with Miss Delmar's is sufficiently preposterous and injurious in any event."

"Assuredly, and with all my heart, my dear madam!" replied the scout, with a readiness that once more restored the lady's calmness.

"Of course, you must see the matter in its proper light, since you are a gentleman, sir," she said, with renewed cordiality. "You know that the expense is nothing to me in this matter. So now, pray, make yourself comfortable, colonel, and tell me when you shall set out on your expedition to rescue my niece."

Mrs. Jernyngham had the best accommodations of the traders at her disposal. But when her visitor had settled himself into the comfortable easy chair to which she signed him, she was not a little disappointed to have him explain to her why it would be at least two or three days before he could undertake the contemplated expedition.

CHAPTER III.

RED TOMAHAWK.

"In the first place, ma'am," Buffalo Bill went on to explain to Mrs. Jernyngham, "I am here now, as I mentioned in my written communication to you, simply on a short furlough from my official duties as commander of the Nebraska militia, and chief of Governor Thayer's staff."

"Then I am bound, by previous engagement, to get the Indian policeman, Red Tomahawk, out of the Bad Lands, as a preliminary to his assisting me in the subsequent expedition. My lieutenant scouts, Buckskin Jack Russell, and Yankton Charley, are at this moment actively engaged in organizing a posse sufficiently strong for that purpose. General Miles has already given his consent."

"We start early to-morrow forenoon, and if all goes well, should be back to the Agency here on the following day."

"Then Red Tomahawk will want some little time to recuperate, besides taking care of the young woman whom he, on his part, has already succeeded in carrying off from the hostile camp, so that it will be the day after that—which will be Thursday—at the very earliest that I can set out upon this smaller, but I fear much more desperate, mission for the relief of Miss Delmar."

Mrs. Jernyngham had looked up with sudden curiosity.

"You deem the co-operation of this Indian, Red Tomahawk, then," she inquired, "as indispensable to the success of our undertaking, as I suppose I can call it?"

"Yes, ma'am, or nearly so," replied the scout, reflectively. "Tubbakootuck's general knowledge of the Bad Lands is unsurpassed, and he will now have additional information, fresh and hot from the hostile region which will doubtless be of invaluable service to me."

"This young woman of the unpronounceable name, whom he is bringing to the Agency! I have learned something of her romantic history from her grandfather, Mr. Blakemore, who is waiting to receive her here. She has been among the Indians from her infancy, I understood?"

"Yes; and she was moreover, Sitting Bull's adopted daughter. I doubt if she understands a word outside of her Sioux tongue; and though Wah-kah-shee is a very beautiful young girl, I fear that it will be long before she will take as kindly to civilization as the old gentleman expects and hopes. He has also set his heart on her ultimately becoming the wife of Jackford, his ward, the young gentleman who accompanied Red Tomahawk on his mission and is still with him, besieged in the Bad Lands yonder. Poor Mr. Blakemore will doubtless be no less disappointed in this respect."

"Ah, yes; I have heard that Red Tomahawk is already in love with the girl."

"And she with him. Besides, Jackford himself has doubtless left a prior attachment somewhere behind him in the East, while, even if it were otherwise, Red Tomahawk, apart from his being an exemplary young brave, and fairly educated at the mission schools withal, is hardly the man to yield his claims on the young woman's heart at the demands of civilization, or anything else."

"Well, if the girl is, to all intents and purposes, an Indian herself," observed Mrs. Jernyngham, "of course there could be no great impropriety in such a union, if other interests could be made agreeable and equal, though I cannot but pity Mr. Blakemore for the disappointment so probably in store for him. But now to our own business, Mr. Cody; or to return to our sheep, as the French say. You will doubtless encounter no little danger in effecting this escaping party's rescue. Is it not so?" and she looked at him anxiously.

The great scout could not abstain from indulging in an inward smile at the easy philosophy with which this veteran of the fashionable world could assign the Indianized white maiden under consideration to a purely Indian husband, while having her sense of the proprieties so outraged at the mere possibility

of a similar lot falling to her cultivated niece, in the case of the amorous Big Knife.

"We shall succeed in that undertaking, ma'am," he answered, briefly.

"Oh, thank you for speaking so confidently. Then, Tom—I mean Mr. Travers, will be enabled to accompany you on Thursday, when you start out with your three scouts for the rescue of my niece. He will be here with me by Wednesday. I have had word from him to-day to this effect."

"Is he the young gentleman that Miss Delmar is engaged to, ma'am?"

"Yes."

"Then we'll see about his accompanying me!"

"But, bless me, Colonel Cody, young Travers loves Blanche to distraction! And he will insist on it."

"Still, he mightn't be altogether fit for this sort of work, you know," said Buffalo Bill, dryly.

"Fit? Why, Mr. Travers has hunted lions in South Africa, and fought Arabs in the Soudan! You don't know him. There's no braver young Englishman under the sun."

"Arabs are not Sioux Indians on the war-path, ma'am," with a smile: "and the Soudan somewhat differs from Bad Lands in midwinter. However, we shall see."

After some further words, chiefly of a reassuring nature, the great scout took his leave.

Fifty picked men, white and red, rode out of Pine Ridge on the following morning, with Buffalo Bill, Buckskin Jack Russell, and Yankton Charley at their head.

Among the hundreds who witnessed their departure, with various feelings of solicitude and uneasiness as to the success of their undertaking, was Mrs. Jernyngham, who waved her handkerchief to the great scout, he responding with a last smile of reassurance and a military salute, which was also meant for General Miles, who was at the lady's side.

"Oh, general!" exclaimed the latter, impulsively; "do you really think they will succeed in fetching this Mr. Gory Ax and his party out of their predicament?"

The great Indian fighting general pulled his grizzled mustache to hide a slight smile, and replied:

"I can only hope so, ma'am, because Buffalo Bill is at the head of that rescuing band. In the meantime, pray be of good heart." And she smilingly permitted him to conduct her back to her quarters; for, in addition to the intense cold, a severe sand-storm was beginning to blow down from the north-west.

Buffalo Bill and his two lieutenants were riding somewhat in advance of their band, which was following under the immediate command of the scout Louis Rameau, when all were suddenly enveloped in the whirl and fury of the sand-storm referred to. It was, in fact, a sand and snow-storm combined, and, though of brief duration, was very violent while it lasted.

This was about two miles out of the Agency, and as the air cleared an unexpected sight presented itself.

Two troops of cavalry, exhausted and decimated from the Battle of Wounded Knee, were seen coming back toward the Ridge, their wagon train following about a mile behind, though somewhat away to the north.

"Ha!" the exclamation was Buffalo Bill's, as he pointed to a large band of Indians that was sweeping down upon the wagons from the north-west. "Two-Strike's band, with Two-Strike himself at their head, by Jupiter!"

"True ez you're born, colonel!" echoed Yankton Charley, standing up in his stirrup for a better view over the distant wagon tops. "I know him by ther double-line of eagle-feathers down the back of his head. By Jingo! he must hev heard of Wounded Knee, an' this is his fust swoop out of his Bad Lands eyrie fer revenge."

"He'll hev it, two, 'r I'm a cayote!" cried Buckskin Jack. "Thet intervenin' ridge hides him from ther soldiers, an' he's already nearer ter ther wagons than we are. He'll scoop 'em in, sure!"

"Only to have them torn back out of his eagle's clutch, then!" said Buffalo Bill; and then, coming to a momentary pause, in order to more thoroughly take in the situation and gauge his distances, the sharp, decisive words of command flew out of his mouth, like shot out of a gun: "Quick, Buckskin, over yonder with you to apprise the troops! Yankton, hurry up our main body to support me!"

Buckskin was off to execute his order as soon as he could wheel his horse; but Yankton could not but linger, open-mouthed, for an instant.

"Hold on, colonel!" cried Yankton. "Good Lord! ye won't tackle all them Indians alone?"

"Bring up our band after me!" reiterated the master-scout, in a voice of thunder. "Do you hear?"

He only waited long enough to see the scout dash back at last toward the rescuing party, which was less than a quarter-mile

behind; and then, wheeling his own horse, was off like a meteor in the direction of the apparently doomed wagon-train.

"Can Two-Strike have forgotten his word to me?" muttered the great scout between his teeth, as he dashed away. "Yes!" with another glance beyond the wagons; "there is no mistaking that lofty figure, that dancing eagle crest. Two-Strike himself, with at least a hundred of his individual tribe—the flower of the hostile Sioux. Ha!" with a disappointed clenching of the teeth, and a fresh spur for his flying steed.

He was yet half a mile away from the train when the Indians were seen to sweep down upon it like a hurricane.

There were a few scattering shots, probably telling of the death of such of the teamsters as had offered resistance, and then a dip in the broken ground momentarily shut out everything from view.

When Buffalo Bill surmounted the corresponding rise of ground the train was already in the hands of the savages.

With rare good judgment, they had not stopped to loot the wagons, but had wheeled the teams, and were already making off with them for the Bad Lands as fast they could lash the exhausted animals into action.

Buffalo Bill had halted his brown steed on the crest, and now smiled to perceive that his presence had not as yet been noticed by the now fugitive savages.

"It is my turn now," he muttered. "Two-Strike, you will find that you do not break your word with me, without paying the cost!"

A moment later, his entire band of fifty came galloping up to his side.

They were but half the number of the hostiles, but what of that.

In ten minutes he had them marshaled down in the next dip of ground, out of sight of the Indians, in two squadrons, one under Yankton Charley's leadership, the other headed by Louis Rameau, himself in the general command, as a matter of course.

Thence he was enabled, by the nature of the ground, to lead them leisurely and sinuously to an eminence, about a mile beyond, where the marauding Indians were virtually at their very feet.

The savages looked up with a startled yell, but it was too late.

The scouts, with the prince of plainsmen at their head, were already thundering down upon them, firing as they came; while at the same time one of the cavalry troops, brought back at Buckskin Jack Russell's summons, appeared on another ridge-crest a little to the south, thus placing them between two fires.

In the ten minutes' melee that ensued, soldiers, rescuers, and hostiles were mingled indiscriminately in a hot carbine, Winchester, and revolver fight.

Then the wagons were recovered, and the Indians were in panic-stricken flight for the Bad Lands, leaving nearly a score of their number dead on the ground, and without any serious loss to the victors whatever.

While the brief fight was raging, Buffalo Bill had just emptied a couple of saddles with his unerring Winchester, and was careering with several others of his band, in hot pursuit of a small squad of fugitives, when a strong voice called out to him, in Sioux, from among some neighboring rocks:

"What, Big White Chief Bill! is it thus that you would treat your old-time friend and fellow-hunter, Two-Strike, of the Bois Brules?"

The master-scout reined up, in some astonishment, to perceive Two-Strike himself, magnificently mounted, and standing out against the sky as if carved out of bronze, horse and rider, on the very summit of the rocks.

"Traitorous chief!" he indignantly thundered, in response, "why have you broken your plighted word to me?"

"Bah!" cried the great chief of the hostiles, "all words break in time of war."

"You'll find to your cost, Two-Strike, that my secret power over you still holds strong and good."

"And when and where, Big White Chief Bill, will you seek me to prove it?" mockingly.

"In the heart of your rock-fastness in the Bad Lands, and within less than a week!" roared out Cody.

And then he was spurring up the steep when, with a majestic wave of the hand, the red warrior urged his steed out of sight on the opposite side, and was seen no more.

Buffalo Bill regretted the impudence of his last words when it was too late to recall them; and it had been noticed with surprise by several hearers of the brief colloquy that neither he nor Two-Strike had sought to exchange a shot while it lasted.

What was the secret power which the master-scout was generally credited with holding over the great chief of the hostiles, and which he himself had at last proclaimed?

That is one of the chief mysteries to be unfolded by this action and incidents of this thrilling and true narrative.

The recapture of the wagons having been secured our hero and his band of rescuers pushed on their way into the Bad Lands.

The thrilling story of the speedy and bloody accomplishment of their mission, and of their triumphant return to Pine Ridge with Red Tomahawk and his party, belongs not to this narrative.

It forms a lurid *denouement* to the preceding novel of this series, entitled "Big Foot's Band; or, Captain Wallace's Last Charge."

On the Wednesday, or next day, following the rescue, Buffalo Bill had his next interview with Mrs. Jernyngham.

The lady received him with her accustomed graciousness. On a sofa, in her reception apartment, reclined a strapping big, handsome, and fair-haired young Englishman, wounded in a slight skirmish with the hostiles of the preceding day, who was introduced as the Mr. Tom Travers, Miss Delmar's affianced lover, already referred to.

After the preliminary congratulations, Mrs. Jernyngham exclaimed, with her usual volubleness:

"Oh, Mr. Cody! to think of how strangely things turn out. Here you are, safe and sound, and doubtless in readiness for your desperate expedition for the rescue of my niece; and yet here is Mr. Travers, too, though incapacitated from accompanying you."

Buffalo Bill had by this time ascertained that Mr. Travers' wound was in the foot, and more painful than serious.

"We'll have to get along without the gentleman's services as best we can," he politely replied, though decidedly satisfied with the situation. "How are you finding yourself now, sir?"

"Ho, fairly enough, you know, colonel," responded Mr. Travers, who had already described the manner of his receiving the random shot with elaborate detail. "But the idea of being laid up by such a beastly small scratch, and me just dying to get a crack at these Hindians, along with a'unter and fighter of your reputation! But 'ere, colonel," with genuine earnestness, for he was evidently a high-spirited, gallant young fellow; "couldn't you put haff the hexpedition a few days. I then might be able to accompany you, you know. Blanche is my hintended, you know; and, good Lawd!" gritting his teeth, and with flashing eyes, "ow shall I hever survive not participating in her rescue, and meeting that ulking duffer, Big Knife, or 'w'atheve he calls himself, face to face."

But no; Colonel Cody was quite certain that no delay was possible; and even Mrs. Jernyngham was half-reluctantly compelled to agree with him, notwithstanding what she thought the expedition was missing through lack of Mr. Travers' co-operation.

"We must do our best without him, ma'am," repeated the great scout, philosophically. And he then took his leave, after promising to introduce his fellow-scouts early on the following morning, just prior to setting out upon their hazardous undertaking.

It was at the close of a cold, lowering day as he stepped forth from the trader's house, and the vast camp, fort and town combined, that went to make up Pine Ridge at this critical period, was in bustling commotion, with the camp-fires already beginning to glitter among the hundreds of Indian tepees on the encircling hills.

CHAPTER IV.

AMONG THE TEPEES.

Awaiting him at a rendezvous agreed on, a comfortable cabin well back on the wild hill-side to the north of the Agency, Buffalo Bill found the four men who were to accompany him into the Bad Lands on the morrow.

Of these, Yankton Charley and his subordinate scout, Louis Rameau, were preparing supper over a roaring fire, which diffused a comfortable warmth throughout the rude but substantial interior, while Buckskin Jack Russell and the daring Indian policeman, Red Tomahawk, were cleaning up their shooters and other weapons in a cozy corner.

All had been conversing in low tones, but the conversation ceased and all looked up expectantly as their famous leader entered the cabin.

"It's all right, boys," said the latter, cheerfully. "The tenderfoot is not to accompany us—his sore foot won't let him, thank the Lord!"

There was a general expression of relief.

"Ugh!" exclaimed Red Tomahawk, who retained many of his Indian idiosyncrasies in spite of his blue uniform and his long-training on terms of perfect equality among the soldiers and the white scouts here, there, and almost everywhere throughout the wild north-west; "glad of it."

"Still," observed Colonel Cody, reflectively, "this Mr.

Travers might have been of real use to us, with some experience in Indian fighting, such as your Mr. Jackford had, Tom. He's a big brave Englishman, with lot's of sand in him. I'd bet on it."

"Still, he'd only be in the road," observed Buckskin, satisfiedly. "We're enough as it is, colonel, in my opinion."

"Mine, too!" grunted Yankton, stirring up the camp-kettle, while Rameau silently nodded his acquiescence. "Tenderfoot's no good."

Red Tomahawk rose, and, doubtless being pretty hungry, peeped into the smoking kettle, with a sidelong glance at the coffee-pot.

He was a superb specimen of the red-man, six foot-three in his moccasins, with a flashing eye and much nobility of mien.

"My young man, Mr. Jackford," he said, simply, "was no tenderfoot. He had fought Indians before, and was afraid of nothing. How I wish supper was ready!"

"Now!" exclaimed Yankton, hoisting off the pot, while Louis Rameau clatteringly produced the tin plates, tin cups, knives and forks. "An' this hyar *pot-a-feu*" (Yankton was supposed to have both French and Indian blood in his hardy veins) "orter be a good 'un, 'r I don't know how to cook."

While the meal was in progress, Buffalo Bill, after assuring himself that all preparations were complete for the morrow's start, observed:

"Look here, men! it has struck me that we might put in a good two or three hours this evening, in the way of obtaining more definite information than we now possess concerning the lay of the land before us. I mean more particularly, of course, concerning the exact location of Miss Delmar's place of captivity, the best means of reaching her through the hostile camp, and so on."

"What air your orders, colonel?" inquired Buckskin.

"I propose that we each visit such of the tepees scattered roundabouts as we are best acquainted with, and among which such of the Big Knife squaws and old men as did not accompany him into the Bad Lands are indiscriminately scattered about among the friendly tribes. You know how swiftly information from Big Knife himself would be likely to reach them. Well, we will meet here again, say, at ten o'clock, with such reports as we have been able to gather. What do you all say?"

There was a general and hearty acquiescence.

"Good thing, Big Chief Bill!" exclaimed Red Tomahawk, on his part. "I know Big Knife's old uncle, Little Jump Dog, among the Gros Ventres Sioux tepees on the south. I'll see what I can make out of him." And, seizing his rifle, after wrapping himself up warmly, he forthwith strode out into the wintry night.

"I'll try the Cheyenne lodges to the south-west," said Yankton Charley. "I bet some of Big Knife's relatives who know me can be found thar. Louis Rameau, you come along. You can try some'er ther tepees further back in the big ravine. You'll be sure to pick up suthin'."

"Right, Yankton," responded Louis, in his accustomed taciturn way. "No like trying, anyway."

After these two had likewise taken their departure, Buckskin Jack looked at Buffalo Bill, who was leisurely making himself ready to follow their example, and said, in a rather disconsolate tone:

"Look hyar, colonel, if we wuz only down Rushvilleways, in old Nebraska, I'd be all right in a racket like this hyar. But what do I know 'bout the tepees of the diff'rent friendlies an' half-friendlies, roundabout ther Ridge hyar? No more, 'r not much more'n a cat in a strange garret. See? So, I reckon I'm out in this hyar deal."

"No, you're not, Buckskin," replied Cody, in his blunt, decided way. "Come with me?"

"Good 'nough!" and Buckskin sprang to his feet with surprising alacrity, reaching for his rifle and winter traps. "Whar ye goin', Bill?"

"Up among the tepees directly back of this hill. I know that Big Knife's mother and lame sister are taking pot-luck somewhere among 'em since he lit out for the Bad Lands so suddenly, with the best part of his band. Come along!"

After quitting the cabin, and securing the door in a rough fashion, they struck straight up the rough hill-side, guided by the ragged fringe of tepee-fires on the crest, and with the hundreds of lights from the great military camp-town in the valley behind them.

The night was not very dark, however, though without moon or stars—one of those opalescent wintry nights, with a weird sort of sky-brightness of its own.

Besides, the hill-side was not steep, save in places, though rough with rock-juttings, and honey-combed with shallow pockets and caves.

However, when not more than half-way up, Buckskin suddenly

stopped, and, ungloving his hand, stretched it out before him, with a muttered oath.

"What's the matter?" demanded his companion, sharply.

"Snow!" with another oath. "Can't ye feel it spittin' inter yer face?"

"Yes; and so much the better. Come on!"

"By Jingo! I didn't think o' thet. So it is, perhaps." And the ascent was resumed.

By the time the summit was reached, the air was thick with the swarming, all but invisible flakes; slowly whitening the figures of the Indians, smoking their pipes or making their miserable evening-meal around the open-air tepee camp-fires, that were irregularly scattered here and there.

The great scout was known almost everywhere among the tepees, both personally and by reputation, and for the most part with the profoundest favor and respect. Still, there were exceptions, as we shall see.

Under his lead, the two men passed among the fires, exchanging friendly nods and "Howdy's" with braves and squaws alike.

Crossing a dark strip of ground beyond, they made a slight descent, and then entered a long and wide ravine, skirted on each side by a long line of tepees and fires.

"These friendlies in here ought to be particularly well contented just now," said Cody, in a low voice. "They received their beef rations but two days ago. Look at the meat-pots on the fires; and yonder's a buck trying to sing a song, and without being drunk at that."

Approaching a large fire around which a large group of Indians of both sexes—though, barring the war paint, which of course the friendlies did not affect, the squaws could only be distinguished by their leggings, few of the men wearing those of the traditional Indian pattern—Buffalo at once shook hands with an old and dignified-looking chief; and, after introducing his friend, this colloquy took place between them, in Sioux, of course.

"Red Cloud, you and your people up here are looking well and kindly."

"Buffalo Bill, we always look and feel so when we can keep warm and have plenty to eat. Here!"

The old chief passed the pipe he was smoking, which was ceremoniously returned to him after each of the visitors had taken a whiff at it.

"I find you up here among your people's tepees, Red Cloud, and not in your own comfortable cabin down under the hill. How is that?"

"One must share one's people's common lot sometimes, Buffalo Bill. I wish they could all have comfortable houses like that of mine under the hill, but they can't."

"Still, you are old, my friend; and see, the snow whirls, the wind bites."

"I am old, and my bones often ache, friend, but, as for the snow and wind, bah!" with a shrug of the blanketed shoulders. "I am still an Indian. That will do for squaws," contemptuously indicating the large adjoining tepee, brightly lighted within, and from which issued numerous squaw-like voices at intervals, "the open camp-fire, in all weathers, is for the Indian brave, when he is strong and free."

"You say you are still an Indian; ay, and a brave and true one, too, Red Cloud—even like the mountain oak, rugged and powerful in its old age, which may fall at last out of sheer weariness of living; but which the storm-winds of heaven may strive in vain to bend or uproot—the glory of the earthly wilderness, the splendor of the Great Spirit's happy hunting-grounds beyond the skies!"

The old chief gravely inclined his head in acknowledgment of the fulsome compliment, and which he doubtless considered as nothing more than his due.

"Red Cloud," continued Buffalo Bill, "my friend and I would have some talk with Choc-taw-reesh, the mother, and Malk-wah-kee, the little lame sister, of Big Knife, the renegade Ogallala chief. Where shall we be most likely to find him?"

Red Cloud spoke in a low voice to a young squaw at his side, and then indicated a tepee at the farther end of the ravine as the place where the squaws in question were most likely to be found.

Buffalo Bill thanked him for his information, and was then about to withdraw, with his companion, when a strangely impressive incident occurred.

Suddenly a squaw's voice from the adjoining lodge rose in a wild, shrill, yet not discordant chant, or song, that swept out upon the wintry night in a sort of fury of mingled defiance and despair.

It was a battle-song, a call to arms, and the old chief sprang to his feet, throwing back his blanket, his grasp upon his rifle, his whole figure dilating, his face menacing and exultant.

At the same instant, his younger braves (those who were always so urgent for war among the friendlies) came thronging around

him from every quarter of the camp, with brandished weapons and uproarious whoops, while there was the glimpse of a wild figure at the door of the tepee.

It was that of the singer—a handsome squaw, her loosened midnight hair flying about her dark, contorted, flame-lit face, a bared scalping-knife in each lifted hand.

But ere this Buffalo Bill's iron grip had closed on his companion's shoulders, dragging him silently out of the howling crowd and out of sight down into the ravine.

"It is the old chief's favorite wife—a she-devil!" he hoarsely whispered, in response to Buckskin's inquiring stare. "Curse her! If old Red Cloud ever breaks faith with the Agency to join the hostiles, it will be through her influence, even more than that of dare-devil Jack Red Cloud, his son. But let us hasten. This incident is fortunate for us in at least one respect. It clears out the lower ravine of the more dangerous young bucks."

This proved to be true, for they made their way to the lower end, through the lines of fires and tepees, apparently without attracting any observation whatever.

Entering at last the tepee that had been indicated to them, they found old Choc-taw-reesh there, together with two other squaws, but Malk-wah-kee was not with them.

The latter, as her mother gruntingly vouchsafed to explain, in response to some courtly inquiries on the part of the great scout, was visiting a smaller tepee yet farther down the ravine, in fact the very last one in the camp.

The daughter, Malk-wah-kee was by far the more important of the two, being something of a medicine woman, and therefore the more likely to be in constant secret communication with her brother.

Accordingly, Buffalo Bill left his brother scout to extract what information was to be obtained from Choc-taw-reesh, if any at all, while he should go in search of the daughter.

"I'll do what I kin 'ith fascinatin' ther old gal, Bill," said Buckskin Jack, gallantly advancing and offering Choc-taw-reesh a handful of tobacco-crumbs by way of breaking the ice of conversation, so to speak; "but she looks ez if she'd like ter stick a knife inter me ribs at any minute. Howsomever, anything ter obleege a friend." And he promptly squatted cross-legged before the antiquated beauty's feet.

Buffalo Bill smiled, for the mother of the handsome Big Knife was assuredly as hideous as original Sin herself; but no time was to be lost in commiserating or applauding the self-sacrificing magnanimity on the part of Buckskin, so he hurried out of the lodge.

The snow had stopped falling, and he had no difficulty in locating the small tepee to which he had been directed.

It was entirely isolated from the others, and, though a light glimmered from within, there was only perceptible the flickering embers of an attendant open-air camp-fire, a little to one side of it and up along the rocky wall of the ravine.

CHAPTER V.

A THRILLING ENCOUNTER—THE LITTLE LAME MEDICINE WOMAN.

As the master-scout was approaching the lonely tepee without any particular caution, he suddenly saw something which caused him to crouch behind a friendly rock, gripping his Winchester with a tighter clutch, and with every faculty on the alert.

Two or three figures, or the shadowy outlines of such, had flitted mysteriously along the upper rocks beyond the fading camp fire and the side of the tepee, and had then as mysteriously disappeared.

What could it mean?

None of Red Cloud's own camp would require to exercise such stealthiness of movement; while Brule emissaries were known to be constantly haunting the friendly camps for the purpose of spreading disaffection among them.

Buffalo Bill crept up stealthily, from rock to rock, from cranny to cranny, to the spot at which his keen eye had detected the flitting figures.

If Brule, or hostile spies they should prove to be, it was of vital importance that they should be disposed of forthwith, and—in the present excited condition of the old chief and his younger braves—if possible, without disturbing the camp.

He accordingly shifted his rifle to his left hand, and drew his hunting-knife with his right.

He had hardly done so when three Brule braves, in full war-paint, suddenly rose, as if from the very ground, and silently precipitated themselves upon him, with uplifted gun, knife, and tomahawk respectively.

But sudden and preconcerted as was the attack, Buffalo Bill, the Prince of Plainsmen, was not unprepared for it.

Stepping among them with the rapidity of a sinuous lightning-bolt, a side swipe of his rifle-barrel knocked the tomahawk

wielder senseless, the hatchet falling from the nerveless red-skin's grasp convenient to his own, which thereupon dropped the gun like a flash to substitute it for the better weapon at close-quarters fighting.

Almost simultaneously, he dodged, driving his knife to the hilt into another foe's heart, and then, diving forward with the force of a catapult, he staggered the third with a tremendous butting blow, delivered full in the throat, easily tomahawking him dead at a single left-handed blow before he could recover.

However, the hatchet remained sticking in the fallen Brule's skull, so deeply was it buried therein.

The next instant, however, the first brave whom he had felled—a gigantic warrior, bared now to the waist—having recovered his senses, was upon him like a hurricane, weaponless, but with outstretched paws and arms as formidable as those of a grizzly bear on the war-path.

But in an instant the master-scout had closed with him, clutching his throat with a murderous left-handed grip; and away they went tumbling down the slope in a death-lock.

They landed squarely in the dying camp-fire, the hostile undermost, his bare back toasting and sizzling on the live coals, Bill on top, his knife-hand free at last.

The Indian, might well have yelled, but for the steely grip on his throat, for he was smoking and roasting like a pig on the spit, but a single blow of the knife put an end to both his sufferings and whatever warlike aspirations might have still lingered in his untutored breast.

All this on the snow-sheeted ground, and by the weird reflection from the camp-fires farther up the ravine.

The great scout staggered to his feet, and recovered his rifle, scarcely able for the moment to realize the good-fortune that had attended him in this prodigious unequal hand-to-hand fight.

Then, momentarily weak and dizzy, he plunged headlong down the side of the ravine and through the side of the tepee.

A young squaw, nursing an older one, who was sick, was beside her charge, the sole occupant of the lodge, until this unlooked for and most unceremonious entrance of our hero.

Both were too frightened to scream, and in an instant Buffalo Bill was on his feet, with such explanations as quieted the alarm of at least the younger; who was none other than Malk-wah-kee herself, with whom he was well and even somewhat favorably acquainted; while, as for the invalid squaw, she was apparently too far gone to yell out if she had wanted to.

"You might have entered the tepee by the door, White Chief Bill, and have been more welcome," said Malk-wah-kee, gravely. She was a very pretty young Indian woman, of not more than eighteen, whose lameness was so slight as to be barely perceptible. "However, if you tumbled down the rocks by accident, of course you are not to blame." Bill had said nothing about his terrific fight outside in his explanations. "But," with a rueful look at the rent in the side of the tepee, "this poor woman's habitation is ruined. I am afraid she will freeze to death."

The scout had exchanged pleasant glances and words with "the little lame medicine woman" before now, but he was somewhat surprised. Her language was in keeping with her neat and modest appearance. Apart from the great sweetness of the voice that gave it expression, translated out of its Sioux barbarism, it would have been English of classic purity. As for her medicine-woman reputation—in such odd contrast with her youthfulness—she might have acquired it from some smattering of the art derived from the mission schools, supported by a subsequent fortunate cure or two among her own people, but for this he cared nothing.

"It is pretty tough on the poor creature," he admitted, with a glance from the hole in the buffalo-sewn wall to the motionless woman on the couch of skins, who was eying him listlessly; "but ain't she pretty well done for already, my dear?"

"No; she will recover, if I can get her to the Agency hospital to-morrow, as I had intended."

"Where's her husband?"

"Off to the hostiles with my brother," a little bitterly. "Isn't it the way with all of 'em? She is one of my own people."

This was said in English, and pretty good English at that. The colloquy was thereafter carried on, for the most part, in that tongue.

"Hold on!" said Bill; "I'll fix up the tent in short order." And he forthwith stooped down and began to mend the rent with surprising swiftness and celerity.

Malk-wah-kee, while occasionally ministering to her patient, watched him interestedly.

"There's blood on your knife-sheath, White Chief Bill!" she suddenly exclaimed. "It's edges drip with it." The scout had forgotten to wipe off the blade before returning it to its sheath. "What does that mean?"

"Oh!" carelessly, and finishing his job with the tepee; "didn't

you hear the scream of the panther I was knifing up yonder in the rocks just before my tumble into this place?"

"No."

"Well, neither did I," said the master-scout, though he was careful to say it exclusively to himself. Then he confronted her seriously, saying: "You haven't asked me why I am here, Malk-wah-kee?"

"Then you were on your way to see me in the proper manner, when you stumbled down the rocks, White Chief Bill?"

"Yes."

"Why are you here, White Chief Bill?"

"Can't you guess?"

"Perhaps so; but tell me."

"Malk-wah-kee," even yet more seriously, "I am more than old enough to have been your father."

"You don't look it, White Chief Bill," with a little start—a pleasurable little start, one might almost have thought. "In fact"—she hesitated.

"In fact," with absolute simplicity, "you are the handsomest man I ever saw, or dreamed of."

Buffalo Bill bit his lip.

"This is all absurd nonsense, Malk-wah-kee," he said, in a severely paternal way. "I'm here, as you must have guessed, about the young lady your brother, Big Knife, carried off."

"Well?" calmly.

"She was carried off, unmistakably?" he asked eagerly; for, if the truth must be told, the great scout was at times not altogether certain on this point, howsoever confidently he might have expressed himself to the contrary notwithstanding.

"You are to rescue her, in the interest of the young lady's rich aunt, White Chief Bill?" with total indifference to his own question.

"Yes," a little reluctantly; though at last he decided to trust her implicitly.

"When do you start?"

"To-morrow."

"Well, yes, then," slowly; "Miss Blanche was carried off unmistakably; and very much against her will."

"Why have your brother's people here sought to give a contrary impression?"

"They are ignorant and vain, while the young lady is so high up, so beautiful and rich. Miss Blanche was kind to me—kinder than all the other lady teachers. I love her, and I am grateful."

"You are, perhaps, in constant communication with Big Knife?"

"Yes."

"Malk-wah-kee, I want you to tell me all you know about Miss Delmar's place of captivity, and the best way for me to succor her."

"My brother would kill me."

"He shall know nothing; I will take care of that."

"What do you already know from Yankton Charley?"

Surprised, Buffalo Bill told her the extent of the information he had received.

"You need know no more at present," observed the strange little squaw, quietly. "Should you succeed in piercing Two-Strike's lines—in reaching the top of the guarded plateau in the middle of Les Mauvaises Terres—you will soon know more, and perhaps unexpectedly."

"I cannot say more now. Good-by, White Chief Bill."

She was speaking in Sioux again, and in her low voice, that had so much meekness and music in it.

Moreover, she rose from her seat by the sick squaw's pallet, in a firmly dismissive way that was sufficiently conclusive.

Thanking her, he turned to go, and then, thoughtfully, turned back again, holding out his hand, in which she timidly placed her own, casting down her eyes.

"Malk-wah-kee," he said, gently, for there was a pity in his great heart for this poor young thing—perhaps a trampled savage flower, but with God's truth and hope in it, blindly groping to lift up its darkened life among those of its nobler sisterhood—"Malk-wah-kee, when shall I see you again, if I come out of this peril successfully?"

"Perhaps when you least expect it."

"I don't mean that," not understanding, and a little impatiently. "I mean, you know," awkwardly, "that I would like to do something for you—to advance you in the world, should such be your aspiration as I suspect."

"Yes, Great Chief Bill," almost inaudibly, and the rough little brown hand in his slightly trembled.

"What," kindly, "do you most wish in the world, for instance?"

She snatched away her hand, and for a single flashing instant lifted to him her eyes—a sudden glory in them that both mystified and troubled him, he scarcely knew why—after which they

were downcast as before; and never but once again in his life was that revelational look vouchsafed him, before it and the poor, beautiful eyes themselves faded forever.

"What do I most wish in all the world?" she repeated, slowly.

"Yes."

"Well, Great Chief Bill," thoroughly calm and collected, "apart from one wish that you will never know, I think I should best like—wait! Have you not among you, in the great world, medicine women, no less than medicine men?—healers, I mean, who study, and are truly wise, and can do great good among the broken and the suffering?"

"Oh, it's doctresses, you mean—woman-doctors?" cried Bill.

"Yes, I think so."

"And that's what you'd like to be?"

"Yes."

"Then by Jupiter!" heartily, "that you shall have the chance of becoming, if ever I have the opportunity of giving it to you. Cheer up, my girl! Who knows but that you may one day become noted as the great squaw-doctor—and no quack humbug about it either—and have your shingle hanging out in Sioux City, or Spokane, or somewhere else?"

And, with a hearty shake of the hand, he hurried out into the night, without a present thought for his three dead men up there on the snowy rocks, almost at his shoulder, and muttering to himself:

"The oddest, queerest little squaw I ever knew!"

How much, for life or for death, can be compressed in brief.

Not more than half an hour had elapsed between Buffalo Bill's leaving his fellow adventurer, Buckskin Jack Russell, in the larger tepee, at mirror-shattering old Choc-taw-reesh's feet, and his return thence.

Buckskin jumped to his feet, and hurriedly rejoined his commander, with a most disgusted look on his face, and something other than his Winchester rifle bundled under his left arm.

"How did you get along with the old witch?" Cody inquired, as they passed up through the ravine.

"Drop on it, colonel!" was the growled and profane answer.

"The old she-devil actually did try to stick a knife inter me on the sly, and more than once."

"Any information?"

"Not a rap!"

"What's that bundle under your arm?"

"A brand-new squaw's dress complete, in deerskin, an' of a sartain size. I bought it of one of ther other squaws fer a package o' beads I happened to have with me."

"A squaw's costume! What for?"

Buckskin had by this time recovered his good humor.

"Ever see Louis Rameau do the squaw-act in a French-an'-half breed dance, up on ther Red River of the North?" he asked.

"No."

"Wall, he kin do it to a charm; an' I thort thet, 'ith this hyar costume along 'ith us in ther Bad Lands, it mought come in sorter handy ez a disguise, 'r suthin' er ther sort."

"Good idea!" said the master-scout, quickly. "Let us hurry up now, if we are to get back to the cabin by ten, according to appointment."

He had already told his companion of his adventure with the trio of Brule spies.

On reaching the head of the ravine, old Red Cloud was found to be still smoking peacefully by the great fire, with a few companions, mostly old men.

The adjoining tepee was silent, the squaws' wild battle-song was long since hushed, the clamoring bucks were housed away in the various lodges, and all was once more at peace.

"Great Chief Red Cloud!" said Buffalo Bill, laying his hand impressively on the old warrior's shoulder; "there is trouble and treachery in your camp."

"It cannot be, for I am here," was the disdainful answer.

"It is the truth," repeated Bill, impressively. "Three of Two-Strike's spies were here in the ravine, at all events. With what object you can guess—to hiss treason into your young men's minds, and whisper them away to danger and destruction in the Bad Lands! I myself saw them skulking at the lower end of the ravine."

"What!" roared the old chief, springing up in a fury of outraged authority; "have they dared?"

Then Buffalo Bill and his companion hurried away, and, as they made their way up out of the ravine, they heard the entire straggling encampment around them in a tumult.

"They'll know thet you did 'em up, Bill," suggested Buckskin Jack. "They'll know thet no man but you could hev did sech a job."

"Let them know or suppose what they choose," replied the master-scout, coolly, "so long as Red Cloud and his people are saved to the Agency. Come along!"

Arrived at the rendezvous, they found their three pards

equally prompt to the appointed hour, and awaiting them there.

Red Tomahawk, on his part, had succeeded in obtaining little additional information from Little Jump Dog, Big Knife's old uncle, among the Gros Ventres tepees, but had, nevertheless, succeeded in surreptitiously bringing back with him a complete ghost-dancing costume, which he thought might possibly prove of service in the forthcoming expedition.

"May come in handy, along with Buckskin's squaw-dress," commented Buffalo Bill, approvingly. "Yankton, have you and Louis done anything among the Cheyenne tepees?"

Yes; they had found a Cheyenne hostile, just in from the Bad Lands on the sly, and so boastfully drunk that they had extracted much from him that was new and might prove useful concerning Two Strike's great fortified village on the elevated plateau.

"We're all right, it appears to me," said the master-scout, in separating from his companions for the night. "Try to be looking your dandiest, one and all of you, by early breakfast to-morrow. For, just before we start, I've promised to introduce you personally and individually to Mrs. Jernyngham and Mr. Travers."

"Great lady, much money!" commented Louis Rameau, in his odd, stoical way. "Mebbe much money in belt-pouch, if we succeed."

"Perhaps so, Louis; but let us first succeed," rejoined Buffalo Bill, dryly. "Good-night, boys, and good rest! They may be the last comfortable ones we'll have for several days to come."

CHAPTER VI.

ON THE THRESHOLD.

Perhaps the scout, among Buffalo Bill's four picked and veteran followers, who made the profoundest impression upon Mrs. Jernyngham and her young English guest, was Red Tomahawk.

Buckskin Jack Russell, with his rugged and typical characteristics of the true frontiersman, "as to the manner born," could have had no occasion for apprehension as to the picturesqueness of his personality.

Yankton Charley's unabashed democratic self-respect, from bronzed and mustached frontispiece to jingling spurs—or, "boots, belt and breeches," as the ruder saying goes,—in the presence of Atlantic sea-board regality and "stony British stare," was worthy of all praise.

The dark, Indian complexion and featural beauty of Louis Rameau, in his half-Indian costume, and notwithstanding the undeniably rapacious glare which he at once fastened upon the lady's diamond brooch and ear-rings, made her mentally pronounce him quite romantic on the spot.

But for the towering Ogallala Indian, Red Tomahawk, or Nature's nobleman in all his unconscious majesty, there was a tacit granting of the need of superiority from the start.

"I don't wonder," candidly admitted Mrs. Jernyngham to Colonel Cody a little later on, "that Mr. Blakemore's Indianized granddaughter should have fallen in love with him. Why, the man is simply superb—a sort of Aboriginal Coriolanus, I am sure!"

"Red Tom's a bang-up good Indian, ma'am," acquiesced the great scout, somewhat prosaically.

"But do tell me, colonel," continued the lady, a little nervously; "this other Indian, this Big Ax, you know, from whose clutches you are going to rescue my poor Blanche——"

"Big Knife, ma'am," corrected the other.

"Ah, yes! well, I—I do hope that he is not quite so heroic and handsome-looking as this, this Red Thomas is!"

"Oh, no, ma'am! make your mind easy, ma'am," replied the only Buffalo Bill, pleasantly. "Big Knife is a dandy buck in his way, but no young lady of good taste would think of comparing him to Red Tomahawk for a single instant."

Mrs. Jernyngham drew a long breath of relief.

Then she gracefully presented each scout, their commander included, with a suggestive two-quart flask, neatly wrapped up against suspicion, bade them Godspeed individually, while throwing out sufficiently broad hints as to how generously and substantially grateful she might prove in the event of Miss Delmar being restored uninjured to her anxious arms, and the interview was at an end.

But the effect of the presentation upon young Mr. Travers was of a somewhat different character.

"Mr. Cody," he said, quite seriously and confidentially, soon after it was over, "do you know that, notwithstanding I am so deeply in love with Miss Blanche, I am really quite glad, you know, that I'm not going to accompany you men on this expedition, don't you know?"

"Glad to find you so resigned to the situation, sir," was the sympathetic response. "What's up?"

"Well, sir," hesitating, "those—er—associates of yours, you know?"

"Yes?" encouragingly.

"W'y, I—I really fear, you know, that they might guy me a little."

"Nonsense, my dear sir!" exclaimed Buffalo Bill, reassuringly, and without breaking a smile; "you were never more mistaken in your life. Perfect gentlemen, every man of them. They would not, under any circumstances, guy you a little, on my word!"

And shaking the blonde slayer of lions and Soudanese heartily by the hand, the colonel made his general adieus, and was off.

It was eight o'clock in the morning when the five men rode out of Pine Ridge for the Bad Lands, attended by a single pack-mule bearing their provisions and slender camping outfit, together with some extras.

Armed to the teeth, serviceably mounted, veterans in scout-ing, Indian-fighting, and far West adventure in general, a better equipped expedition of its size had, doubtless, seldom set out on a more desperate quest.

Though the threshold of their chiefest peril—the eastern border of the ill-omened *Mauvaises Terres*, or Bad Lands, of the early French explorers—was but twenty odd miles away, the intervening country was daily being traversed by Indian bands, hostiles, friendlies, or doubtfuls as the case might be. The military troopers or scouts were also roving hither and thither.

War, and rumors of war were constantly in the air. Skirmishes and isolated tragedies were constantly occurring.

Indeed, Buffalo Bill had quietly declared at the outset that it was doubtful if they should cross the interval at the end of a day's journey without serious interruption, or more or less fighting, and the event proved the accuracy of his judgment.

The weather had moderated greatly, being cloudy and clear by turns, and the going was fairly good, considering the nature of the country.

In fact, while crossing a small tributary of the White River, when scarcely five miles out of Pine Ridge, Louis Rameau, who chanced to be riding ahead, signaled the alarm, and then came galloping furiously back from a slight eminence he had reached.

The party, at their leader's command, had no sooner formed a compact and wedge-like front among some rocks, when a single horseman of extraordinary aspect came charging almost directly toward them from another slight rise of ground a little more to the northward.

The horse was a dappled Indian pony, lathered with foam, wild with terror, and without guidance.

The horseman, a tall, gaunt Indian, in full paint and feather, sat bolt upright on the speeding animal's back, stiff as a man of bronze, apparently weaponless, his arms hanging rigidly at his sides, his eyes fixed and staring straight ahead.

"Stop! don't waste a bullet, Yank," commanded the master scout. "That man is dead already—perhaps has been so for several minutes."

This was the truth.

As the mad steed whirled past, its lifeless rider suddenly collapsed, falling prone on his face at their very feet, revealing the deep but bloodless death-shot directly between the shoulder-blades.

"Was that all?" laconically demanded Buffalo Bill, turning to Rameau.

"No; more to come. Wait! we're all right," was the response.

And then, almost immediately, from the same direction, distant shots, and the nearer clatter, swiftly deepening into a thunder of hurrying hoofs.

"Hyar they come!" yelled Buckskin, as a mob of fugitive hostiles came breaking over the bridge.

"Hold fast as we're pointing, and we'll easily split 'em apart," coolly ordered the leader. "But don't shoot unless compelled. It isn't any funeral of yours, if they let us alone."

They were coming down like mad, twelve or fifteen runaway Indians, brandishing their guns, and giving utterance to their panic-stricken yells.

But not a shot was attempted, and the wedge-like front of the adventurers, securely posted almost in the center of the trail, split their ragged column apart, even as a pointed rock in the middle of a down-rushing mountain torrent, and in a minute the fugitives had disappeared on either side.

Then came the conquerors and pursuers—well mounted Indian scouts in army blue—and their commander, a young officer, with his saber flashing, waved his hand to Buffalo Bill, as they swept past like the wind, and with a victorious shout.

"Lieutenant Casey and his splendid scouts," commented Bill.

"Things are getting rather hot hereabouts, but we might as well get on the move."

It was the gallant and noble young Casey who was so treacherously murdered by a Brule brave a little more than a week later on, and whose death caused as profound and regretful a sensation throughout the country, as had that of the ill-fated Captain Wallace at Wounded Knee.

The little band arrived at noon, without further incident, at the looted store of a young French half-breed trader, where they stopped to console him a bit, and take their noonday bite.

Louis Rameau recognized the ruined young merchant as an old friend, and no sooner was the party dismounted, than the pair, in their impulsive fashion, rushed into each other's arms.

"Ah, my friends," half-sobbed Lenoir, as the trader was named; "could you have appeared but eight hours sooner, my all was there," he sorrowfully pointed to the wrecked windows and gutted interior; "but now—well, I shall simply have to begin the world over, and with scarcely a penny to my name."

A raiding band of Brules and Arrapahoes had done the mischief at daybreak, and the appearance of a strong force of the Ninth Cavalry had alone caused them to make off without burning the building, and perhaps murdering its despoiled proprietor.

The party sympathetically shared their cold meal with the young man—who had been just on the point of setting out for the Agency when they arrived—and then resumed their march, the trail leading them more and more to the northward.

An hour later, a very large body of Indians, on their way southward, appeared on a distant ridge, and Red Tomahawk was sent forward to reconnoiter, while the rest of the party halted and made themselves reasonably secure in an excellent position among the rocks at the foot of a low butte.

But, long before his return, the master-scout, with his field-glass, satisfied himself that it was not a war party, but an entire tribe of friendlies on their way to Pine Ridge from the north-west.

"It's Young-Man-Afraid-of-his-Horse and his following," he announced at last. "This will be good news at the Agency, though I have never for a minute doubted the loyalty of Young-Man-Afraid. He's just as solid as his father, Old-Man-Afraid, was before him."

Indeed, when Red Tomahawk came galloping back, he was accompanied by the chief himself, who cordially shook hands with the great scout and his companions, though only able to give a rather dismal description of what he had seen.

Young-Man-Afraid was in ordinary times even a more powerful chief among the Sioux than Two-Strike himself, for he held his authority by right of inheritance, which the last named did not.

He was now on his way to the Agency, with such of his tribe as remained to him, from a long sojourn up in the Crow country, far to the north-west.

"Look at them, Big Chief Bill!" he exclaimed, indignantly, as his people went filing past, with dogs barking, tepee-poles trailing, and all the multifarious paraphernalia of an Indian village on the move. "The men, and squaws, and babies that you see in the procession, do they look fat or lean?"

Bill had to confess that none of them looked especially overfed, at all events, which, indeed, was all too apparent.

"And how many young fighting-men do you make out among them?" was the next query.

"About a hundred."

"There were three hundred when we started from the Crow country," said Young-Man-Afraid, moodily. "As we crossed the north-eastern strip of the Bad Lands, they fell away from me daily—by twos, threes, and the dozen. All my authority could not keep them back. These are all that are left me. Perhaps, before we reach the Ridge, these too will have melted away, like spring snow in the sunshine, leaving me only my old men, the squaws, and the papooses. Where will they have gone, and where did the others go? To join Two-Strike in his fastness. Good-by, Big Chief Bill!" holding out his hand. "Curse the agents, who would make us believe that a ration-beef weighing seven hundred pounds weighs twelve hundred, while they pocket the difference in Government money. Why can't they put us under the army men? Soldiers do not despise Indians, because both soldiers and Indians are brave, and respect each other. Meantime, we starve. However, I obey for the present, and go to talk with General Miles and General Brooke. Good-by! maybe we are all hostiles soon," grimly.

The master-scout tried to argue with him, but in vain. Young-Man-Afraid simply waved his hand, and then rode off after his people.

CHAPTER VII.

FRESH ADVENTURE—THE VAILED SQUAW.

The traveling had been growing steadily more difficult, the rises and falls in the vast rock-strewn, butte-broken, and coulee-traversed plain, if such it could be called, more and more frequent.

But, in spite of the growing inconveniences of the trail—and there was no choice in trails when one was heading for Les Mauvaises Terres, for that matter—there were yet fresh adventure and trouble for our bold quest-seekers, before even the threshold of their great and complicated toils should be attained.

Five miles farther on Buckskin Jack, who had during this time been scouting in advance, came galloping back, waving his hand as a signal for a halt.

"What is it now?" coolly demanded Buffalo Bill, at whose command the party were already falling into a fairly good defensive position. "More hostiles on the stampede, eh?"

"Not by a durned sight, colonel!" exclaimed Buckskin, springing from the saddle, and hurriedly leading his horse in among some clustering rocks, where position had been taken up, the animals being out of sight, while their dismounted riders were ranged along behind a natural wall of huge boulders commanding the trail in front. "It's ther Injun scouts—some of Captain Taylor's, I think—what's tryin' to save their scalps this time, an' 'ith at least half a hundred o' Two-Strike's devils dead arter 'em, on the jump!"

He had hardly finished speaking before the fugitives—six in number, with one white or half-white scout, Joe Biddle, among them—came in view, thundering down the rocky trail.

"Hold on, Joel!" yelled the master-scout, springing on a boulder, and waving his gun; "here's safety for you, in here with us."

Luckily for the fugitive scouts, he was recognized and heeded in time.

They came to a tumultuous halt, and speedily taking in the saving situation, if such it were, lost no time in joining the others in among the rocks.

"Ye're good 'uns, whet there be of ye, colonel," said Biddle, a tough, wiry little man, while leading his horse in under cover with the rest; "but thar's a slashin' big gang of 'em arter us. Howdy, Buckskin! Thet you, Louis? What, Yank and Red Tom, too, eh?"

Under Cody's directions, the scouts, carbines in readiness, were speedily in line behind the boulders with the rest. But the foremost of the pursuers burst in view over the neighboring ridge in time to see the scouts disposing of their horses behind the rocks, and immediately set up a triumphant chorus of whoops, while making a brief pause there for their companions to join them.

"Good!" called out Cody. "Lie low, all of you, and wait for the word. They think they have only you and your carbines to deal with. Our Winchesters will be something of a surprise for 'em, if we can get them to crowd down into the defile here."

After collecting on the ridge, the hostiles—there were fifty or sixty of them—came galloping confidently down the slope, yelling and whooping, but paused at the head of the defile—if such the brief narrowing of the rock-girt trail could be called—whence they began pouring bullets into the boulders, over the tops of which only the military hats of the government scouts were permitted to be visible, but without effecting any more damage than the wounding of one of the freshly secreted animals in among the higher rocks behind.

"Not a shot in reply!" called out the master-scout's stern voice of command. "Wait for the word."

"You bet, colonel!" responded Biddle, speaking for his companions no less than himself. "You're boss o' this hyer rock-trap fer ther time bein', an' we're glad ter hav it so."

"It is the truth!" grunted, in broken English, Little Owl, one of his comrades, a particularly stalwart scout in regulation blue, who was crouching, carbine at rest, at Red Tomahawk's elbow. "When Buffalo Bill commands we are content."

"Shut up, you chaps!" cried Yankton Charley, who was in a position whence the enemy's movements could be best observed. "Hyar comes er flag o' truce, 'They're goin' ter ask fer a pow-wow."

Then a chiefs in all the bravery of war-paint and eagle-feathers, came slowly walking his horse down the trail. He waved a white rag, which was attached to the end of his rifle.

"It's Crow-Dog, one of Two-Strike's big men," observed

Buffalo Bill, in a low voice. "Joe Biddle, you answer if he wants to talk; and remember, you can't lay it on too thick."

Here Crow-Dog came to a halt and called out, in pretty good English, a formal demand for the surrender of the six scouts. If this was complied with, they would, he said, be well treated as prisoners of war; otherwise their position should be carried and all hands put to death in short order.

"No!" roared back Biddle. "Come an' take us, blast yer streaky picter! We've still two or three rounds left, an' we'll hold agin ye ter ther ha'r in our scalps."

"Should say so!" grunted Little Owl, while his four Ogallala companions in blue nodded their acquiescence. "Mighty nice chance we friendlies would have as prisoners to Two-Strike's Brules and Arrapahoes! Ugh! They'd put us to torture in five minutes."

An expression of fiendish exultation had crossed Crow-Dog's savage, painted face.

Only two or three rounds of ammunition left to the cornered fugitives! (There were really more than twenty to a man.) What nuts for the hostiles, so to speak!

Without another word he wheeled his pony and galloped back to his companions, tearing the white rag from his gun as he did so, and shouting out, in Sioux, as a matter of course:

"Come on! One big rush, and we have them at our mercy."

"Steady there, all of you!" called out Cody for the last time, in a hoarse whisper. "They're coming."

The nature of the trail was such that the hostiles could conveniently charge down into the defile about four abreast.

But such was their blood-thirsty eagerness to gobble up the exhausted handful of foemen which they implicitly imagined to be alone making a last desperate stand against them, that they came galloping down the trail pell-mell, jostling one another, firing as they came, and with savage laughter in their yells.

"Open out on 'em!" shouted Cody, at just the right moment, when the mob were within less than twenty yards of the natural ort. "Let 'em have it!"

As he uttered the command, his own magazine gun opened the ball by toppling a particularly demonstrative brave out of the saddle at the first crack.

Then the entire eleven guns swept through the pass with terrific effect, the five Winchesters letting out a steady stream of balls, while the six uniformed scouts were only a little less murderous with the swift firing from their breech-loading carbines.

To say that the enemy were taken completely by surprise but feebly depicts the bloodiness of the result.

For half a minute or so it was simply carnage.

A chorus of yells, whoops, and screams, mingling with the sharp crack of the rifles, the whistling of the leaden messengers of death, and then less than two-thirds of the assailants galloped tumultuously back up the trail, leaving the remainder, dead or dying, in the defile, together with the carcasses of several slaughtered ponies, while others, riderless, dashed madly hither and thither.

The case might have still been critical for the defenders, however. For the infuriated hostiles still outnumbered them in the proportion of three or four to one; they were already gathered in consultation, just out of range; and, with cooler judgment, it would have been a comparatively easy matter to have overpowered the scouts by climbing over one of the adjacent buttes overlooking the latter's position, and thus have peppered them to death at their leisure. But this was not to be.

In fact, Buffalo Bill, quickly aware of the new danger to his party, was just thinking of ordering a temporary retreat back through the pass, for the purpose of securing a more tenable position, when the second fortunate change in the situation took place.

There was a confusion of yells among the consulting Indians, and then they were seen to suddenly disappear over the ridge on which they were gathered, and then shots were heard in the distance yet further beyond.

"Cap. Taylor an' the rest er our boys onto the hostiles' flank!" shouted Joe Biddle, springing to his feet. "Quick, mon! we may yet sail inter 'em f'm berhind."

Col. Cody questioned him, and then gave the order of 'boots and saddles' for his own party.

In a moment all hands were in the saddle again, and heading up out of the corpse-strewn pass, the trained pack-mule—Yankton Charley had selected the animal for this qualification more than any other—intelligently following of its own volition.

Biddle was right.

On reaching the top of the ridge, they perceived a running fight going on in the valley beyond, between the remnant of Crow Dog's force and nearly the entire body of Captain Taylor's scouts, over a hundred strong.

Or, rather it should be called a fighting flight, since but a short time elapsed before the hostiles were routed in panic far

away to the north, with several more of their saddles emptied in the doing.

Then Biddle and his friends rejoined their main command, while the rescuing expedition hurried along upon its way, without waiting for the thanks that would doubtless have been theirs.

"We must reach the buttes overlooking the Bad Lands for our night's camp, if possible, by sunset!" said Col. Cody, with no care to conceal his anxiety, as he glanced at the fast declining sun. "But if these interruptions are to continue, we'll be stalled midway thither, with no wood for camp-fire, no decent camping ground, or anything else."

But yet one more interruption, and, in many respects, the most momentous of all, as affecting the aims of the expedition, was yet in store for them.

The tall and irregular buttes fringing the embrace of Les Mauvaises Terres, were already well approached, and the party were hurrying forward over the rough trail, when Yankton Charley, who had been scouting off to the right, came dashing back at a break-neck pace.

"Injuns on the jump! ith ther cavalrymen in pursuit!" he cried. "Inter cover with ye, colonel! They'll be along this hyar way in less'n three minutes."

"I'll be hanged if I do!" exclaimed Buffalo Bill, losing his temper for the moment. "This sort of thing, like the mule-teams that kept stepping through Mark Twain's dugout roof, is getting a trifle monotonous."

He accordingly contented himself with simply forming his party in a solid body upon the rocky slope beside the trail, with the pack-mule in the center, and there, with cocked Winchesters, they waited the result.

A moment later, the ragged column of the fugitive Indians came stampeding along the trail, in a mad break for their fastness in the Bad Lands, singly, or by twos, threes, or fours—perhaps forty or fifty in all, and, for the most part, in too much of a hurry to pay any attention to the halted expedition, or even to look to right or left.

Then there came a group of five or six, with a stalwart brave—and a singularly handsome one, in spite of his disfiguring war-paint—at their head, and with a veiled young squaw among them.

That is, she should have been young, judging by her symmetrical proportions, and the singularly graceful way in which she sat and guided the mettlesome bronco that she bestrode. And the veil tied about her face and head was a thick, blue one, such as any one of the women teachers at the Agency schools might have worn to protect her eyes from snow-glare, or her complexion from the biting and chopping wind.

All this was perceived in a fleeting instant, for the entire procession was hurrying past at as break-neck a speed as their jaded animals could be urged into.

But the mystery of the veiled squaw was intensified by that very fact—the fleeting nature of her passing—for Buffalo Bill thought, or half-thought, that she furtively waved her hand to him while galloping by.

But of this other fact there could be no doubt—that the young brave heading the group turned his face squarely to the little band on the hill-side in passing, and that this incident elicited an exclamation both from the master-scout, and Yankton Charley.

"Big Knife himself, by Jupiter!" ejaculated the former.

"Ther very cuss!" echoed Yankton, with the customary oath, while both Louis Rameau and Red Tomahawk had likewise recognized the brave. "Holy smoke! I wonder 'f that veiled gal eud hev been Miss Delmar, what we're bent on rescuin'. Big Knife's just dare-devil enough ter fetch ther young leddy on a jaunt out o' ther Bad Lands, like this hyar, in er sheer spirit er brag."

Buffalo Bill started at the suggestion, but then at once dismissed it from his mind.

"Not to be thought of," he responded, tersely; "Miss Delmar, as you ought to know, is a large-framed young lady, while the squaw, who just passed, was under-sized, and of very slight proportions."

Then the pursuing cavalry troop came thundering past, also in too great haste to bestow more than a cursory glance to right or left; and the expedition once more got upon the move.

Its course was not again interrupted that day, and camp was at last pitched, just as darkness was closing in, at the extremity of an elevated, partly wooded valley between two rugged buttes, and with the vast and chaotic hideousness of the storied Bad Lands—not unlike in character to the famous Lava Beds of Northern California, made equally notorious by the Modoc Indian war of fifteen or sixteen years ago—spread out at its feet.

"So far, so well," commented the master-scout, thoughtfully.

"But it has been a hard first day—much harder than I had anticipated."

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE THICK OF IT.

The selection of the first night's camping-ground had been left to Red Tomahawk and Louis Rameau, and a very wise selection it proved.

The valley alluded to was comparatively little frequented, being well off the trail. In addition to there being an abundance of scrub-timber, for the purpose of affording fuel, and marking the approach from either end, there was an irregular chain of frozen or half-frozen pools of rain or snow-water—mere cup-like pockets in the rocks that had caught and held it there from time to time during the melting days, while here and there among the rocks and trees were discoverable, in spite of the midwinter season, little patches of succulent green and but partly frozen bunch-grass and moss, upon which the animals could manage to browse out quite a respectable meal in the course of the night.

There the place was excellently sheltered from the bitterly cold winds that set in with the decline of day.

This fact together with the large fire, and the one Sibley tent that had been brought along, and could be made to accommodate all hands, barring such as would be on guard-duty, tended to make the little camp as snug as could well be desired.

And presently, with the coffee boiling, and some fresh beef, comprised among the packed provisions, broiling on the live coals, not to mention a temperate sampling of the contents of good Mrs. Jernyngham's two-quart flask betimes, the picture of hard-earned comfort, after the toils and dangers of the day, was about as complete as could be expected amid the desolate point of Nature's savagery that framed it.

Louis Rameau was the cook of the occasion, and a very excellent one he made, while Red Tomahawk was assigned the initial duty of looking after the stock, and guarding the camp.

Supper had been duly disposed of, and the last named policeman-warrior, had been relieved by Yankton Charley for some little time, when the latter came in from the extreme end of the valley looking to westward, with a mystified look in his rugged face.

"Any o' ye ever see watch-fires on the jump over 'bout a thousand miles of territory, like will-o'-ther-wisps playin' at hop-frog?" he asked. "Well, 'f ye haven't, ye'd best come 'ith me an' take a squint over ther Bad Lands."

They accordingly went with him through the brief interval of scrub-oak, and, arriving at the lofty valley's precipitous verge, notwithstanding that he had somewhat exaggerated the extent of it, there was certainly an extraordinary spectacle that suddenly burst upon the astonished gaze.

Beginning miles upon miles, and leagues upon leagues, away to the southward, from crag to crag, and from peak to peak, a swiftly lengthening chain of signal-fires was spouting and leaping away to the northward, as if successively, or responsively, kindled by the stroke of a magician's wand.

It was like a gradual and swift outflowing of beaded stars, or the star-like punctuations in a comet's tail.

In a few minutes the chain had extended curvingly farther away to the northward than the eye could follow it—probably for a matter of thirty odd miles, or the entire length of Les Mauvaises Terres; a weirdly baldrick of lurid flame upon the bosom of a region perhaps as nearly suggestive of some desolate section of the poetic Inferno as any other tract on the face of God's for the most part green and smiling earth.

Far off to the north-westward, on a direct line with the trend of the little airily perched butte valley from which the observation was made, and probably just about in the center of the watch-fire, as if kindled there, like a flashing jewel or regalia-emblem on a supine titan's breast, there glittered a larger and star-like watch-fire circle, whose luridness was mellowed by the distance into a soft and yellowish glow.

This marked the great hostile village, or fortified camp, of Two-Strike and his adherent chiefs, crowning the neck of the precipitous, loftily elevated, rock-buttressed, and crag-battle-mented plateau, in the very heart of the ill-omened tract, and constituting in its way one of the most striking topographical eccentricities of our western wonder-world.

"Blizzard and blowguns!" shouted Buckskin Jack Russell, who was given to such extravagances in the way of epithets at times; I've seed Injun telegraphin' by signal-fires afore this many an' many a time, but 'f this hyar doesn't take the devil's belt, I hope I may be scalped! What kin it mean, colonel? It can't mean their telegraphin' the news o' Wounded Knee over ther land. Thet news is four days old now, an' orter to be knowed

or guessed by every buck, squaw, ol' man an' papoose of 'em clean 'cross ther Black Hills inter ther Rockies an' Bitter Roots by this time."

The master-scout not answering at once—for he was momentarily barred in thought and contemplating the impressive spectacle with folded arms—Yankton Charley sang out:

"What 'f it shed be this hyar expedition o' ourn thet the red cusses is flashin' about in this hyar Fourth-o'-July sorter way? But no," with an uneasy laugh; "seech a thing is hardly ter be thort of."

"Then why speak of such an absurdity?" demanded Cody, suddenly rousing himself, and speaking with abrupt sharpness. "Nonsense? Of course it is."

"But how d'ye explain it, any way, colonel?" again demanded Buckskin Jack Russell.

"I don't know—yet," was the gruff reply; and, still with his eyes fixed upon the belt of fires, Buffalo Bill relapsed into his former reverie.

The country of the Bad Lands is a volcanic region, and presents a similar appearance, in many respects, to what a like section in that airless and dead world, the moon, might be imagined to impress the near-at-hand beholder.

On all sides yawn great fissures and zigzag coulees. Peaks of gray-colored earth, or abrupt buttes, or limestone bluffs, of a dirty whitish hue, tower on this hand, broken lines of bold, grinning crags and precipices on that. It is like the spot we read of where "he who enters here leaves hope behind." As one advances into this realm of desolation, the trees become more and more stunted, and the grass, save in secret, uncertain patches, disappears.

Finally, all vegetation ceases. There remains naught but a forbidding, depressing series of peaks, buttes, giant rock obelisks, of deep valleys, of precipice-surrounded, boulder or rock-strewn narrow plains, of horrible pits and of yawning canons, or gorges, suggestive of a road leading into some desert tract of pandemonium, a fitting hermitage of lost souls, eating their hearts out amid the solitudes of perdition. A more God-forsaken, heaven-deserted country cannot well be imagined, apart from the icy solitudes of the polar regions. At all events, even without excepting the terrible Death Valley of South-western California, a more fitting place for a great Indian massacre cannot be found in the United States.

Occasionally broader valleys afford a stunted growth of bunch-grass for ponies, but these comparatively fertile spots are great distances apart and of very limited extent.

In prehistoric times eruptions of the submerged volcanoes, or shrinkages in the earth's too-rapidly cooling crust, have doubtless caused the hideous irregularities which everywhere exist—the grinning and chaotic grotesquerie of Nature's handiwork which forms Les Mauvaises Terres of to-day.

It is a splendid country for ambushes and wholesale assassinations—a country of natural cul-de-sacs, blind canons and little amphitheatres, as it were, with but one entrance, and affording excellent hiding-places for lurking savages.

The camp or village of the hostile savages, under Two-Strike's chief command, was situated in the midst of this wretched region, on a plateau lifting its jagged, and, in the main, perpendicular, sides one hundred and thirty feet above the surrounding valleys.

There is only one place where men can scale its sides, and that place, on the south-east corner or neck, is only twenty feet wide at the top, and not more than three times as broad at the bottom.

The surrounding peaks tower higher than the little plateau on which nestles the hostile camp. But these peaks and buttes, being perpendicular and terminating, could afford no advantage to troops in an effort to over-brow the enemy.

The road, or shelving rock-layer, leading up into the hostile camp, was broad at the base, but narrowed as one approached the fort, sloping and zig-zagging up at an angle of twenty-five degrees. All other sides of the plateau were perpendicular, and consequently inaccessible.

Add to the foregoing picture of this strangely desolate country that, at the time our adventurers were looking out over it, under that picturesque illumination afforded by glistening belts of signal fires, it was patched thinly and irregularly over by a spectral masking of snow—very much suggestive of a ragged and tattered white counterpane, or cerement, imperfectly covering a blackened and distorted corpse—and the impressiveness of the scene as it struck even their veteran spirits can be readily appreciated.

Presently the chain of watch-fires began to fade and dwindle. Then the master-scout, again starting out of his moody reverie, and remembering the question put to him, turned to Red Tomahawk, who had by this time also joined the group, and laid his hand on his shoulder.

"You, Tom," he said, slowly, "are the last one of us out of any permanent visit into that hell on earth. What do you think is the meaning of that extraordinary chain of signal fires?"

"I can guess pretty well, Big Chief Bill," replied the stalwart Indian policeman, promptly. "And so, too, ought both Louis Rameau and Yankton Charley, for that matter."

"It doesn't mean Wounded Knee—a stale story now; and still less does it mean our little descent into the Bad Lands, of which Two-Strike can know little, and would care less, perhaps, even if he were fully informed of it."

"It means war! Those fires are running over the mountains and valleys to summon all discontented Indians to Two-Strike's banner without further delay."

"Some will heed and obey the summons, others will not."

"This is perhaps the first time that the fire-chain has been thrown out so brightly and so widely. But it is not the last time."

"But, Big Chief Bill, what is that to us? If we are going down into the Bad Lands betimes, to fight, and intrigue, and circumvent the hostiles, hadn't we better get into camp, set guards for the night, and go to sleep?"

"Ugh! so say I. For, after we shall have gone down into the Bad Lands, perhaps there will come to us the sleep that has no waking."

"So say I, too, old fellow!" cried Buffalo Bill, slapping him on the back. "Come on, my braves!" And he forthwith led the way back to camp, without having expressed an opinion of his own upon the question which Yankton Charley had so persistently propounded to him.

Perhaps it agreed with Red Tomahawk's, perhaps it did not; but, for all that, he did not express any.

The night passed without disturbance, or even an alarm, and the next morning at daybreak, after a hearty breakfast, Red Tomahawk led the party out into Bad Lands, by a trail well known to him, a little to the north of the place where they had camped.

The weather continued fine and comparatively soft, but with indications of rain or snow.

It was Buffalo Bill's purpose to proceed, leisurely and by as direct a route as possible, straight to the hostile fastness, and there, as a first move, to demand an interview with Two-Strike, both on the strength of their ancient friendship and with a desire to dissuade him from continuing his hostilities against the authorities; thus, if possible, acquiring access to the plateau, as a preliminary to opening secret communication with the captive young lady, in whom, as Big Knife's individual prisoner, he was quite certain that the great chief could have no personal interest whatever.

The chiefs, Little Wound, No Neck and Crow Dog were thought to be still possessed of a sneaking desire to return to the Agency, and at the outset Two-Strike had been quite as much disposed toward conciliation as Young-Man-Afraid himself. But when the slaughter of Wounded Knee had intervened, Short Bull, Yellow Hair, Kicking Bear, and other influential sub-chiefs, mutinous from the start, were doubtless by this time vastly intensified in their uncompromising animosity against the whites; and their influence with the turbulent young men of the tribes, always more or less red-hot for open and declared hostilities, was very great.

But these intentions on the part of the master-scout were destined to frustration at the very start.

Five miles into the Bad Lands, the expedition was all but successfully ambuscaded by eight Indians, who proved to be stragglers from a large outward-bound, generally raiding expedition, under the command of Yellow Hair, and, in beating off the attack, two of the assailants were unfortunately killed.

CHAPTER IX.

"BY THE FLASH OF THEIR GUNS."

After this catastrophe, the remaining assailants, much to the scout's surprise, came up under an extemporized flag of truce to the latter's defensive position at the mouth of a coulee.

All were recognized as Ogallalas (Red Tomahawk's tribesmen), but recently conspicuous among the avowedly friendly Indians at the Agency.

"We recognize you, Big Chief Bill," said their spokesman, with a sad sternness of air, "and we cannot blame you for the death of our comrades, for it was done in self defense. We sought to kill you and your party, and it was no more than fair that you should shoot back. But, dearly as we may have loved you personally, that is a thing of the past. You must go back out of the Bad Lands, or you will all be killed and scalped. It is the decree."

As they seemed peaceably disposed, and to have acted more or

less under compulsion, or a sense of duty, Buffalo Bill at once went out to them.

"Look here, Eye-in-the-Wind," said he, at last calling to mind the speaker's name, and addressing him by it, "none can regret this occurrence more than we. But we cannot go back out of the Bad Lands—at least, not until I can have a talk with my old friend Two-Strike—for we are here on an important and friendly errand. Where is Yellow Hair, of whose to-day's expedition you are a part. I used to know him very well, and I want to see him now."

"Yellow Hair is on in the advance," replied Eye-in-the-Wind, sullenly, while his companions remained like statues on their scarecrow ponies, their eyes cast down, their rifles tightly clutched to their breasts. "Go back, I tell you, or you will be killed. We are all hostiles now. Two-Strike cannot love you any more. Go back."

Then Red Tomahawk, at Colonel Cody's request, came out of the coulee, and attempted to argue with them. But his mere appearance, in his blue uniform, seemed to exasperate them to such a frenzy on the instant that, at a sign from the colonel, he hastened to place himself out of sight again.

"Who and what is that Red Tomahawk?" cried Eye-in-the-Wind, fiercely, his companions meanwhile dashing here and there on their broncos, flourishing their guns, and giving utterance to wild whoops. "A brave man, truly, who wears warm clothes and keeps his belly full, while his brethren freeze and starve, and whose late footsteps here were marked with Indian blood."

They at last galloped off in a body, though not before Eye-in-the-Wind had half promised to convey the master-scout's request for an interview to Yellow Hair.

"He'll come," observed Buffalo Bill, confidently, on returning to his men. "I'm sure of that. Our best gait is to wait here, in the hope of deceiving him as to the real object of our expedition in behalf of the young lady."

But he proved to be both right in his conviction and disappointed in his hope.

Yellow Hair did make his appearance ten minutes later, with a great flourish, accompanied by a dozen or more of his braves—his official staff, as one might say—who looked particularly ferocious in their war paint, freshly laid on the night before, most likely, and frequently punctuated the brief interview with clamorous whoopings and aimless maneuvers on their half-starved, but mettlesome ponies.

He was a short, chunkily-built chief, whose hair—of a dirty reddish tinge, instead of black—stuck stiffly upon the top of his head, like a game cock's comb, and who had in pre-bellum days been rather pleasantly noted at all the Agencies for his fondness for whisky and squaw society.

But almost his first words, after the usual complaints and threatenings, somewhat incoherently blended, dispelled the hope that had been entertained as to preserving intact the real object of the little expedition.

"Bah, Big Chief Bill! what do you take me for?" he roared, as the master-scout coolly stood among him and his braves, on foot and alone, having even left his rifle in the coulee. "You are on your way to get—if you can—the wealthy white maiden away from young Big Knife! Ha, ha, ha! But you could not, even if we should not kill you and your men in the meantime, because she loves him. Bah!" and this he kept repeating over and over, in his execrable English, as if he considered it especially clever or jocular, "what do you take me for?"

Stung by disappointment, no less than by the chief's blatant mendacity concerning the young lady's inclinations, the master-scout was momentarily exasperated out of his accustomed hard-headed coolness and good sense.

"For the rum-guzzling, turkey cock gas bag that you've always been on opportunity!" he shouted, in a white wrath; "Two-Strike is a fool to intrust the command of an expedition to such a suttler's jackass as you are now, Yellow Hair, and always have been! Go over to the Agency and make peace for twenty-four hours. Perhaps you can persuade General Miles to let you have your skin full of forty-rod rotgut at the government expense. It would only require a barrel or two."

Furious with rage, the chief clapped his rifle-muzzle to the scout's heart, and cocked the piece, while the majority of his escort wheeled about them on their ponies, brandishing their guns, and whooping like maniacs.

The little band in the coulee held their breath, expecting every instant to see their dauntless leader murdered before their eyes.

But, the first excess of his imprudent anger past, Cody in the midst of his extreme peril remained as cool as a cucumber; a fortunate interposition saved him, and, oddly enough, even his rashness turned out to be an unexpected advantage in the end.

A self-possessed young brave at the enraged Yellow Hair's side struck up the leveled weapon in the nick of time, saying:

"Beware! Yellow Hair! Buffalo Bill has often been the Indians' friend when they sadly needed one, and Two-Strike would not wish him harmed, at least, by any other hand than his own. I know it," and, with a few well-chosen words, he speedily calmed the irate chief.

"Look here, Big Chief Bill," and drawing close, he leaned out of the saddle to pat Bill on the breast in a peculiar manner; "you shouldn't have spoken to Yellow Hair as you did, you know. It wasn't right."

"Of course it wasn't!" cried the great scout, heartily enough, but also with a significant nod and look for the young peace-maker; "but who among us has control of his temper at all times? I say, Yellow Hair, do you want a pointer from me?"

"What is it, Big Chief Bill?" asked the chief, already mollified greatly, though perhaps with the "I-don't-forget" look kindling in his eyes.

"Why do you let your braves gallop and howl around, like those chaps over there, when there is no occasion for any demonstration whatever?" contemptuously indicating a group of the escort thus reprehensibly engaged. "You never see our soldiers making such consummate fools of themselves, do you?"

"No, Big Chief Bill; I have noticed that," replied the chief, looking both interested and surprised. "Why is it?"

"Because they do not waste and exhaust on the idle air the energies and the enthusiasm which should be reserved for the hour of danger and of action—the defense, the skirmish, or the battle-field. That is why—in a fair field, and altogether apart from the differences in fire-arms and equipments—they always whip you, three to one. Farewell, Big Chief Yellow Hair. Do not say that I am ungenerous, when I freely make you a present of a war-secret such as this."

The chief seemed to thoughtfully consider what had been said. Then, with simply a loudly grunted "Ugh!" he waved his hand, called out a command, and the entire crew dashed off to the eastward out of sight.

"We thort ye 'bout gone, colonel," observed Buckskin Jack, as Buffalo stepped into the coulee, while the other scouts were equally relieved and sympathetic in their looks, if not in expression. "We all thort so."

"So did I," replied the master-scout, with his odd smile. "Curse that bragging drunkard, Yellow Hair! if I ever catch him begging whisky at one of the sutler's stores again I'll boot him till I'm leg weary. There was some good, however, out of my outbreak, after all, I suspect. You all saw the young brave who tapped me on the cheek after knocking up Yellow Hair's rifle." Yes; they had all seen.

"He was a stranger to me. Any of you recognize him?"

All shook their heads but Red Tomahawk, who, after a moment's reflection, said:

"I do now. He is *Chankapteclan*, Arrow-Flight, a young Cheyenne brave from up Rosebird-ways, and I'm strongly inclined to think, here among the hostiles either partly or wholly against his will.

"I haven't a doubt of it," observed Cody. "At all events, this is what he meant when he tapped me on the chest." And he forthwith produced a small roll of smooth birch bark.

It proved to be a message from Miss Delmar, was dated that (Friday) morning, was addressed to "Col. Cody, otherwise Buffalo Bill," and appeared to have been written with the fire-blackened point of a small stick.

It was to the following effect:

"DEAR SIR:

"I learn from a good and unexpected friend that you, with some brave and tried comrades, are hastening to my rescue.

"For Heaven's sake, let nothing turn you back! I am a captive, miserably unhappy, whatever may be told you to the contrary notwithstanding.

"The reckless young brave who carried me off to this miserable place (here on the fortified plateau, in the heart of this nightmare country, which they call the Bad Lands), probably acted under a misapprehension, born of his own ignorant self-conceit.

"But now that he has me here, he will not let me go, and in response to my anger and disdain, which I cannot altogether control, is daily growing more moody and even menacing, until I am greatly terrified.

"So, for Heaven's sake, persist in your object to reach or succor me. Oh, my poor aunt! what will she think or dread?

"The young brave who promised to place me in your hands, if possible, was placed at my disposal by my unexpected little benefactress. I am told that he is honest and faithful. But even he is dubious about being able to reach you with this message.

"His name is Chankapteclan, and, could you confer with him, he might be of service to you. But, ah! if this missive should have been written in vain!

"BLANCHE DELMAR."

This pathetic missive was read out aloud to all the scouts, who listened to it with much gravity.

"Thunder an' lightning!" suddenly burst out Buckskin, with a stream of oaths that would have disgraced a priest, so intent was he upon concealing the emotion of his honest heart. "What air we ter do, colonel? No need of tryin' ter deceive ther reds any longer ez ter our real object—Yellow Hair's words must hev put all idee o' thet dodge out o' your head. What's our best gait now?"

"What is it, you ask?" exclaimed the prince of plainsmen, with the battle-flash in his eye, which neither time nor a showman's successes in all the great capitals of the world had been able to mitigate or subdue. "It is forward and onward, to cut our way openly and above-board, if necessary, through the swarming hostile hordes to the side of the unhappy, entrapped young lady, who sends out to us this beseeching cry from the depths of her captivity! It is forward and onward; by the gleam of our knives and the flash of our guns!"

One and all, the veteran scouts gathered around him, raising their head-coverings reverently, slapping their arms-belts, grasping their rifles with a tighter clutch, and, in obedience to a raised forefinger on the part of Buckskin Jack Russell, they solemnly repeated, after the manner of an oath, the impressive words of their chief:

"By the gleam of our knives and the flash of our guns! Amen!"

Five minutes later they were once more to horse and on the road.

But it was a bad day for Indians in the Bad-Lands, or a good one, as the case might be, when the trails seemed to fairly swarm with them, more or less.

With the central plateau as their nucleus of emission or gathering, glimpses were caught of them almost constantly, going or coming, singly, in pairs, in groups and in bands.

Of course, it was the policy of the adventurers to avoid collisions as much as possible, pending their leader's hope of obtaining the longed-for interview with Two-Strike, which he was still sanguine of bringing to a successful termination, as the best preliminary step of gain—access to the plateau, with his party, but it was not a great while before this was found to be simply impossible.

In spite of the extent of the country, and its varied topography, the Indians were found, in this strip between their fortification and the outer world, so to speak, to be altogether "too promiscuous," as the aged colored hen-roost interviewer observed of the rats in the barn cellar.

The expeditionists had hardly partaken of their noonday cold bite and rest, after hours of devious windings and dodgings by the most tortuous of trails—they were at the mouth of a little blind canon, with the accessible end of the plateau dimly discernible in the distance—when Louis Rameau, on lookout on a neighboring point of rocks, came running back to the little camp, waving his hand.

"A big force coming right up this way, from the plateau, through the deep valley down below there!" he exclaimed, in his abrupt, broken English, pointing away. "Like enough, sent out on purpose to obstruct us. Short Bull commands 'em. I saw and knew him."

Buffalo Bill, puffing his after lunch pipe, leisurely rose to his feet, and looked around him.

The little canon opened out directly upon the trail, which was very narrow at this point, less than twenty feet in breadth, and passing between steep-sided ridges, or buttes, covered with loose stones.

"Short Bull, eh?" he said, reflectively. "The most virulent of the hostile chiefs. Well, this is as good a place to hold him off as any other. At all events, there is to be no retreat. Tumble some of those rocks down into the pass here, my lads, to make a sort of breastwork. The animals can stay where they are in the canon here till we are ready to move on."

The command was executed in short order. While his companions were evening up the improvised wall thus thrown across the trail, Red Tomahawk ran up to the master-scout, while the latter was busying himself with switching up the loosened pack on the mule.

"Big Chief Bill," he exclaimed, joyfully, "even if they should come on overpoweringly, we needn't necessarily take the back track."

"I believe I said that there should be no retreat," was the stern reply.

"Ah!" with a smile; "but if another force—say one of those raiding bands on its way back to the plateau—should come on our rear by this same trail?"

"Humph! Then," with a shrug of the broad shoulders, "I acknowledge we would be in something of a fix."

"But I want to tell you that, even then, we need not retreat, though there would still be a ready escape for us."

"How is that?"

"Don't you recognize this place?"

"No."

"Ah, I forgot that it is not the same trail you made use of before. But look up into the little canon here. Do you not see the head of a branch trail?"

"Is it a trail?"

"Yes, yes; of my own knowledge."

"Well?"

"It leads indirectly to the fissure-mouth of the secret valley, from which you and your fifty rescued me and my companions, only three days ago."

"Hallo! this is worth knowing. But you are sure?"

"Yes, yes, Big Chief Bill! And by pursuing it, in an emergency, we would not be retreating, but would be rather going toward the plateau than away from it."

"Splendid ideal! But is that not the hoof-beats of the Indians coming up the pass? Let us see."

CHAPTER X.

FRONT AND REAR—AN ELEVATED PACK-MULE.

As they joined the three other scouts at the improvised breastwork, the head of the Indian column was just making its appearance, up from the deep valley to the west, into a broader section of the trail, not more than fifty yards beyond, and where it was joined by another one, coming down over a ridge from the north.

Then the others came in view, until there were seventy or eighty in all, spread across the joining trails and the adjacent low ridge to the south of them, in the rather tumultuous array which is the custom of mounted savages, especially when somewhat taken by surprise.

They had probably been on the point of taking the cross-trail, and this sudden view of the improvised breastwork was their first intimation of the scout's presence.

At sight of it, a shout of mingled anger and derision arose from among them, accompanied by the usual extravagant demonstrations, while Short Bull, their immediate commander, calmly rode up and down their front, apparently exhorting them to patience and forbearance.

This chief, Tatankaptecetan, though something of a braggart, was at the same time one of the most vindictive, intellectual, and superstitious, and therefore one of the most dangerous, of the malcontents in the Bad Lands. Two-Strike was his superior in executive ability, and as a born organizer and commander of large bodies of men. Kicking Bear, who had been actively associated with Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull and Rain-in-the-Face in the Custer massacre at the Little Big Horn, was probably his superior in desperate courage. But, in his own way, Tatankaptecetan, or Short Bull, was altogether unique, and a mighty "bad Indian" in both the physical and the intellectual sense.

He was the chief spokesman of the hostile chiefs, in their response to Agency commissioners of three weeks previous, and for mental force and logic his speech to them betrayed a mind of no mean ability. A part of it, according to the report of Louis Shangraux, the scout and chief commissioner, was as follows:

"I have risen to-day, my red brothers, to tell you something of importance. You have heard the words of the promise-makers from the Agency camp, and, if you have done as myself, you have weighed them carefully. If our Great Father at Washington would permit us to continue our religious dance, would give us fair rations, and would quit taking away portions of our reservations, I would be in favor of returning. But even if you," addressing himself to Shangraux and the other commissioners, "say that he will, how can we discern whether you are telling us the truth?"

"We have been lied to so many times that we will not believe any word that your Indian agent sends to us. If we return, he will get the brave army men to help him take away our guns and ponies, and likely enough put some of us in jail for stealing cattle and plundering houses; whereas he and his predecessors have been stealing from us steadily for years—swindling us in our rations, our blankets, and our lands—and no one has ever thought of punishing them. No, no; we prefer to stay here and die, if necessary, to suffering the loss of our manhood and our liberty."

"We are free now, and have plenty of fire-dried beef stored away in the rock pockets of these wild hills and solitudes. And we can dance all the time in obedience to the command of the Great Wakantanka. We tell you to return to your agent, and say to him that the Dakota Sioux in the Bad Lands are not going to come in."

"It is better to die here as brave men, and in obedience to the

commands of the Good Spirit, than to live like cowards at the Agency, on scanty rations, disarmed, without horses or guns. No, we will not return. If we dance, our Good Spirit will protect us, and when all dancers are sincere the bullets of the soldiers will harmlessly fall to the ground, without power to hurt. There is no army so powerful that it can contend with Wakantanka. Therefore, we are not afraid to remain here, and remain here we shall."

Soon after the Indians had gathered in sight, Buffalo Bill, affecting not to notice the presence of Short Bull—with whom he was, nevertheless, very well acquainted—sprang upon the breastwork, and called out:

"Is Two-Strike among you there? He is, or used to be, my friend, and I want to talk with him. We are not here desiring to fight, but to proceed peaceably for a talk with Two-Strike. Is he there among you?"

There was not a word of reply, in fact, a sudden quiet fell upon the assembled warriors.

Then, wheeling his horse, Short Bull dashed up to within a yard of the master-scout, his painted, but not wholly unintellectual face a picture of angry scorn and contempt.

"What is all this nonsense, Buffalo Bill?" he exclaimed. "You know that Two-Strike is not among us, even when you pretend to call for him so innocently. But I, Short Bull, am here to answer for him, and you know me. Now, what do you want?"

"I want to see Two-Strike," persisted Cody, coolly.

"You can't and sha'n't see him!" roared Tatankaptecetan, in a rage. "In fact I am sent here by him to say as much to you, and to turn you back."

"I don't believe it."

The chief made a furious gesture, but then almost instantly kept down his temper, with unusual self-control for an Indian.

"These are empty words, Buffalo Bill," he managed to reply.

"You do believe what I say, while seeking to deceive us with untruths yourself. You do not want, as a first object, to see and talk with Two-Strike. I know of your ancient friendship with him, and of the secret power you are supposed to exercise over him. But all that is nothing. We are better informed—we chiefs here in the Bad Lands—than you seem to imagine. You are here to seek the release of the young lady who is now with Big Knife's squaws, and of her own free will and inclination, at that."

"You lie now, Tatankaptecetan, and you know it!" thundered the master-scout, once more in a rage at this false declaration, so impudently made.

"Well, Big Knife makes it out as such," replied Short Bull, with surprising moderation.

"And Big Knife lies, as you well know! When was he other than a dandy and a boaster? although I will acknowledge that he is no coward. However," Cody had by this time recovered his cool and collected manner, "he shall answer to me personally for this villainous aspersion of the young lady's character."

Short Bull made a partly deprecating gesture.

"Look here, Big Chief Bill, all this is irrelevant," said he. "Many of us have a respect for you, personally. The same, perhaps, as to your friends yonder behind the stones; with the exception of Red Tomahawk, whom we naturally enough hate as a blue Indian." (i. e., a wearer of the regulation blue.) "But all this, I repeat, is nothing. You must go back out of Les Mauvais Terres, and I am here on authority to tell you so. Will you do it?"

"No; we are headed for the plateau, and we shall keep on."

"Then we shall be compelled to kill you all, though we would be loth to do that—or, at least, Two-Strike would."

"Then Two-Strike can come and tell me so to my face. As for the killing, we can stand a good deal of that, my friends here and myself."

Short Bull was fast losing patience, and, it had to be confessed, with no little reason.

"Look here, Buffalo Bill," he cried, angrily; "You don't surely mean to say that you will dispute the pass here against all my warriors back yonder."

"To the last bullet!" defiantly, though perhaps with more or less mental reservation.

Short Bull was about to answer, when a commotion among his band caused him to turn in his saddle and look back.

A mounted brave, on a lofty point of rock to the left of the band, was waving his blanket, probably in signal for some Indians somewhere out of sight, back of the scout's position; while, on the right coming over the low ridge by the cross-trail, five or six savages, accompanied by three expertly laden pack-mules, were hastening to join the band from the north.

"Scoop in your plunder while you can, Short Bull," said Buffalo Bill, with a sarcastic sneer. "Those are army mules, loaded with fixed ammunition, and you know it as well as I do."

"What of it?" replied Short Bull, without turning his head.

"Indians do not despise fixed ammunition when it falls into their hands."

"Or when they can lay their murderous, thieving hands upon it!"

Tatankaptecetan suddenly wheeled upon him, his face distorted with passion.

"Are you going back, or not?" he hoarsely demanded.

"No."

"Then your blood be on your own heads!" and, turning his pony's head, the chief rode slowly back toward his men.

But, even in his passion, it was noticed that he pronounced the words reluctantly; such was the importance of Cody in the general Indian estimation, or the fear of his continued influence with the great chief Two-Strike, as the case might be.

"Remember, Short Bull!" Bill called after him; "you will have to fire the first shot. We are simply defending our right to the trail here. If there is to be a fight, it will be of your seeking, not ours."

An impatient gesture, without so much as a glance backward, was the only response vouchsafed.

"Bluff is your only game when you're cornered," Bill observed, smiling. "I really hope they will back out, though," with a swift glance that included the little amateur fort, so to speak, and the animals back in the little blind canon to the right, "if they persist in cutting up ugly, I think we can hold our own. At their first hostile demonstration, I shall risk throwing away a shot at one of those freshly captured mule-packs yonder. A bullet, well put in among those fixed-ammunition cases might cause something of a surprise, at all events."

"We kin hold this hyar fort, at least, fer a spell, colonel, you bet!" sang out Buckskin, who, with the others, was snugly bestowed in stooping position behind the barricade.

"Yes, or till we can get away to my secret valley," calmly observed Red Tomahawk.

"Look out!" shouted Yankton Charley. "Queer Injun tactics these hyar, but they're gettin' ready ter fire f'm whar they stand."

The words were hardly out of his mouth, and all hands had just time to crouch low, when, with Short Bull himself taking the initiative, the entire body of hostiles suddenly poured out a murderous and simultaneous volley.

It was a volley that meant business, too, for the bullets fairly hailed against, over, and around the barricade, and Louis Rameau was slightly wounded in the hand by one of them that made its way in by the interstices between the stones.

"Give 'em another chance," commanded Buffalo Bill. "That is, loosen out a few rounds, but be careful to shoot over their heads. I'm for something else."

This was accordingly done, the savages evidently clearly understanding the forbearance that was being shown.

But just as they were obviously preparing for a combined charge upon the barricade, there was a flash and then an explosion in their midst.

One of the newly arrived pack-mules was seen to rise, wreathed with smoke and kicking vigorously, several feet in the air.

Cody's chance-shot had been delivered in the center of one of the fixed ammunition cases which constituted its pack, with unexpectedly disastrous effect.

The next instant the entire pack blew up, with a tremendous explosion, in mid-air, leaving nothing of its unfortunate bearer but flying fragments of mule meat, hide, and bones, besides knocking a dozen or more warriors off their horses, and prostrating almost as many of the animals themselves.

"Mule meat's on ther rise!" bawled Buckskin Jack. "But look out, boys! Hyar they come full tilt, ther hull tribe of 'em!"

And so they did, in a thundering, infuriated gallop up the trail, firing as they came, and howling for blood, like so many painted fiends unloosed.

But at the same time the veteran scouts loosened out upon them such a stream of bullets from their trusty magazine rifles as must have made them think that they had crowded up against a leaden torrent from as many mitrailleuses and Gatling guns combined, and worked by electricity at that.

Saddles were emptied by the dozen and in the twinkling of an eye. Several of the savage horsemen succeeded in spurring up to the very edge, and in one case partly over the top of the barricade, but only to fall dead there; and then the entire attacking force reeled and faded back under that leaden hail, like tossing harvest grain before the sweeping scythe, or summer leaves in the path of a withering sirocco blast.

"Remember, Short Bull!" shouted Buffalo Bill after the routed braves; "you provoked all this."

"Dog of a white scout!" the chief was heard to yell in response, through the dust and smoke that partly curtailed the slaughter-burdened trail; "I'll wipe you all out yet, if it takes the last man under my command. If you don't believe it, look behind you."

Suiting his action to this startling piece of warning, Cody, leaving his men to keep up the firing from the breastwork, ran back up the trail to a point commanding a wide outlook over the country behind and beyond.

One glance was sufficient, and also explained the significance of the blanket signal waved from the point of rock, in the vicinity of Short Bull's command, a short time previous.

Yellow Hair and his entire expedition, on their way back from their early morning raid, were pressing on up a rear valley, and would, unless circumvented, top the pass and be down upon the scout's rear, like an avalanche in less than five minutes.

"Quick, boys!" exclaimed Buffalo Bill, hurrying back to the barricade. "It is about time to give these rascals the slip."

CHAPTER XI.

HOLDING 'EM AT BAY.

The scouts at once dashed into the near-at-hand little blind canon, where their animals awaited them, already in mounting order.

Before Short Bull and his band could well guess the abandonment of the barricade, the little expedition was at least temporarily safe from pursuit in the secret trail up around the back of the little canon, and with four or five huge fragments of rock toppled over into the narrow passage behind them.

"We must make haste, though," said Red Tomahawk, who was in the lead as guide of the movement. "Both Short Bull and Yellow Hair, after my recent experience hereabouts, will quickly guess our destination; and there are other, though more roundabout, trails by which they can reach it."

"I begin to remember the lay of the land now," observed the master-scout, who was at his elbow, the others following close after, with pack-mules in their center. "But look here; what if we find the secret valley already in the hands of the enemy?"

"I do not think we shall, Big Chief Bill," replied Red Tomahawk, though with a certain uneasiness in his tone.

"But such a capital 'find' as that valley proved to you!" continued Buffalo Bill, thoughtfully. "The hostiles would hardly have neglected to avail themselves of its grass and shelter, after the last battle there that whipped them away from the mouth of the fissure entrance."

"Still, Big Chief Bill," and the Indian policeman said this with renewed confidence, "you mustn't forget that the gunpowder explosions inside the fissure on that occasion so blocked it up with fallen fragments that it was only with great difficulty you got me and my companions out through it, with our animals. But we shall see."

Fortunately, they at last reached the fissure entrance in question before being intercepted, and, though there were plenty enough signs of the recent battle and mine-springing alluded to, the passage did not seem to have been frequented since then.

To make sure, however, Red Tomahawk was sent on in with the animals, for the purpose of exploring the interior, while the rest of the party made all haste to fortify themselves at its mouth.

This was merely as a preliminary, in case of Short Bull and Yellow Hair showing up there; Buffalo Bill being still full of the hope of having an interview, or some sort of speech, with Two-Strike before the day should pass.

They were still hard at work, and had got the fissure mouth pretty securely blocked up, when Red Tomahawk returned.

He reported a large number of hostile squaws, old and young, with some children, as encamped in one corner of the inner valley.

"All right!" commanded Buffalo Bill, shortly; "they can do us no harm, and perchance some good, should some of the squaws perchance to be friendlies; here in the Bad Lands against their will. We ought to be thankful that the lookout is so good for us."

Just at this juncture the Indians began to put in an appearance before the fissure-mouth from either side, Short Bull and his warriors from the west, Yellow Hair and his from the east.

All seemed to be about equally exasperated, but, while cavorting around and giving utterance to savage whoops and gesticulating wildly, seemed, nevertheless, to entertain a very wholesome respect for the fissure and its occupants.

"Hallo, Short Bull!" called out the master-scout, as that chief and Yellow Hair came in view, side by side, attended by their personal escorts. "Have you had enough of it, or do you want to try it on again?"

"Buffalo Bill, my dear friend!" Short Bull made reply, in a most conciliating voice and manner, "you have always, at least up to this day, been the Indian's friend. Why should we wish to hurt you, or you wish to hurt us?"

"Why, indeed?"

"That affair of awhile ago was all a mistake," continued he, yet more earnestly. "Come out here, Buffalo Bill, and talk the matter over with Yellow Hair and me."

"Don't imagine that I'm fool enough to come, my beauty," replied the master-scout, promptly, for he scented treachery in the air; "for I am not."

They both then urged him, but as he continued obdurate to all their honeyed speeches, they presently expressed themselves as greatly grieved at his sudden want of confidence in them, and then abruptly withdrew out of sight.

The next minute over a hundred dismounted warriors rushed into the fissure from either side, in a tremendous combined attack, which they doubtless expected would carry everything before it.

But the scouts were prepared for them. Secure in their position, which was tenfold more impregnable than that but recently contested in the open trail, they opened out such a tremendous fire from their Winchesters that, had the savages been twenty times more overpowering, they could not have withstood it in that narrow passage.

In less than a minute the mouth of the passage was choked and piled up with their dead and dying, while the survivors were glad enough to escape out of range.

Then an Indian appeared, waving a flag of truce, and, as the scouts ceased firing, the two chiefs once more made their appearance, and, to Buffalo Bill's great satisfaction, they were accompanied by the head chief, Two-Strike himself.

"Big Chief Bill!" called out Short Bull; "that was another mistake. That attack was made without either Yellow Hair's authority or mine."

"I've no further words to waste on such a liar as you, Short Bull," responded Cody, looking coolly out, rifle in hand, over the piled up carcasses of the slain. "Two-Strike, you are here at last, I see?"

"Yes, Buffalo Bill, I am here," shortly replied the big chief of the Bad Lands, who appeared to be both moody and troubled. "What is it that you want with me?"

"Five minutes' private talk on you know what!" promptly. "Pledge me your safe conduct, and I'll come out to you at once."

Two-Strike—a rather fine-looking Indian, with much less of war-paint and feathered bravery than distinguished his fellow-chiefs—seemed to be greatly disturbed.

"I cannot do what you wish, Chief Bill," he replied, after motioning his companions away from him. "In the present state of affairs here, even my pledge of safe conduct would avail nothing. My followers here are literally frenzied. They would murder you on sight. Listen to their howls. It cannot be."

"Then do you come in here to me. You know me a man of my word when I promise you absolute safety in doing so."

"No," moodily, "I shall not come."

"Say at once," sarcastically, "that you are afraid to have the talk with me I desire!"

"Not that, Buffalo Bill!" haughtily; "you ought to know that Two-Strike is no coward. Still," stubbornly, "I do not wish to talk with you—at least not now."

"When, then?" eagerly. "Give me an appointment to receive me in your village on the plateau, say for to-morrow!"

"No," decidedly, "it must not be. Besides, you must not attempt to enter our village at all, my old friend."

"Why not?"

"At no time would it be safe for you and your friends," this with an air of troubled, but perfect, frankness. "You must not come. Look here; we are going to have a great dance. It begins to-night, and will last three days and three nights. You can't imagine the temper of our people during these religious frenzies. No, no; do not make the attempt; I beg of you say no more!"

"I don't care for that, Two-Strike," shouted Buffalo Bill. "I will take my chances as to that, if you will only——"

But here Two-Strike, with a passionate gesture of refusal, abruptly withdrew to one side, and nothing more was seen of him.

"Come, men!" said Buffalo Bill, choking down his disappointment as best he could. "We might as well go into the valley at once. A few of the loose rocks tumbled down from the fissure's walls back in yonder ought to make our retreat reasonably sure against intrusion from without."

This was accordingly done.

The strange secret valley—already described in detail in the preceding work entitled "Big Foot's Band"—was several acres in extent, and completely surrounded by perpendicular and apparently inaccessible precipices of prodigious height.

As the scouts entered it from the fissure-opening, which they took care to seal behind them, the colony of squaws, mentioned

by Red Tomahawk as having taken up their abode therein, advanced in a body across the turf to meet them.

There were between twenty and thirty in all, without including a dozen or more children, who held back in the wretched collection of tepees which served for the general camp on the farther side of the valley.

They advanced very humbly, their eyes cast down, their blankets drawn tightly around their bodies, and with a general appearance of being greatly terrified.

"Come," said the master-scout, marching at the head of his companions to meet them. "The poor creatures are evidently half-scared to death. We must relieve them of their fears, treat them as well as we know how, and——" he suddenly broke off, something in the unusual stature of the foremost squaws suddenly arousing his suspicions.

"Ware! ware!" he then called out softly, without turning his head, or withdrawing his eyes from the advancing line of bowed and blanketed forms. "Rifles in readiness, though without letting them perceive it. Possible treachery here. Ware, ware!"

He had hardly enunciated the warning when the ten or dozen taller figures foremost in the squaw-line suddenly throw back their blankets, to the revelation of as many painted warriors, armed to the teeth; and then, with an appalling and exultant whoop, their concealed rifles were raised to their shoulders in an instant.

But Cody's shrewdness had already forestalled the deliberated treachery. The scouts, warned in time, were even quicker than their disguised foes, and at once began to shoot them down, hand-running, before the latter could fire half a dozen shots, and those but wild ones that did no harm.

The thing was sprung, detected, and over and done in less than a minute. Every disguised Indian of them was shot to death by that time, and if a couple of real squaws were likewise numbered among the slain by accident, it was certainly through no fault of the scouts.

Thirteen were killed in all.

The remainder of the unmistakable squaws had fled, shrieking, to their tepees, where they continued to wail and beg for mercy.

But the scouts only troubled themselves further by making sure that there were no more disguised bucks among them; after which they quietly looked after their animals, and proceeded to pitch their own camp under one of the precipices not far away from the tepees; for night was now rapidly coming on, and all were more or less hungry and exhausted after the extraordinary trials and perils of the day.

Half an hour later, while supper was cooking, Louis Rameau, who was standing thoughtfully by the fire, after making certain silent observations about the valley on his own account, suddenly said, in his odd, jerky way:

"So, Red Tom, this is your secret valley, is it? Ugh!" with a somewhat contemptuous grunt.

"Yes, Louis," replied the Indian policeman, phlegmatically. "What fault have you got to find with it?"

"Oh, no fault!" the half-breed shrugged his powerful shoulders. "Ugh! why should there be? Only there're more secrets about this valley than you, or any one else but me, can have any idea of."

"What!" they all cried; "you are then familiar with this place, Louis?"

He only nodded in reply, and seemed to suddenly lapse into one of his moody silences, in which they knew from experience it would be useless to question him further, until he should choose to come out of it of his own accord.

CHAPTER XII.

STRANGE DISCOVERIES.

Presently, while the hunters' meal was under discussion, Louis took up a fresh tin-cupful of well-sweetened coffee, and started away.

"Where are you going, Louis?" asked Buffalo Bill, curiously.

"There is little squaw there," replied the half-breed scout, pointing toward the miserable fire at the neighboring squaws' camp. "And I think they have no coffee there. If she is the little Cheyenne squaw I take her for, she may be of much use. She, too, will have been in this secret valley before. Maybe I bring her back with me."

All this was said in a much more primitive and disjointed way than has been used to give it expression.

Nothing was said, and Louis went over to the tepees. He presently returned, accompanied by the little squaw he had referred to.

She was a very small squaw, even smaller than Little Lamo

Medicine Woman Malk-wah-kee, not more than seventeen or eighteen, and with a foxily-intelligent but at the same time sad and honest-appearing little face, of the complexion of a well-seasoned black walnut.

"I was right," said Rameau, explanatorily. "My brethren, this is Chuck-a-popee, whom I have heretofore known." Then, turning to his companion, he said, with the rough peremptoriness which Indians and semi-Indians are accustomed to use with women of their own or an inferior race: "Tell them your story. They all understand Sioux, if you can speak in no better tongue."

Chuck-a-popee promptly obeyed, with much meekness, and yet with a covert animation of manner that argued the possession of a certain individuality of her own, and to the following effect, in substance:

"Great White Chiefs, I talk Sioux, but I am Cheyenne, not Sioux. I came here with my brother from Rosebud ten days ago. Curse the day! He is off with the warriors constantly, and can't get away. I am here, there, everywhere, with other wretched squaws, ever since. We are half-starved. There is little use for squaws here in the Bad Lands; only for fighting men. Those braves whom you shot came here this morning, on the chance of entrapping you. We could say nothing. Well, they have got their dues. Yes; I have met Louis Rameau before; and I know this strange valley even more than he. There are many secrets here. Come with us; we will show them to you. That is all."

Having thus expressed herself, Chuck-a-popee pounced upon a piece of broiled meat, which was given her, and ate it ravenously, besides drinking another tin of coffee.

"What do you say, Big Chief Colonel?" inquired Louis. "The little squaw speaks well, and there is good moonlight. Are you too tired? or will you go with us? There are strange things to know; and now or never is a good word. What do you say?"

"I'm with you, for one," responded the master-scout, promptly rising. "There is no time like the present."

Red Tomahawk and Buckskin Jack also volunteered, while Yankton Charley, being very tired, thought he had better remain, to replenish the fire, look after the animals and keep an eye on the neighboring tepees.

This was readily agreed upon.

Then the exploring party, as thus constituted, with Rameau and the little squaw in the lead, proceeded to a corner between two precipices, where natural steps were found zigzagging upward along the face of the crags, and began to scale the heights, one closely following the other, by the light of the moon.

It was mighty hard climbing, but still it was practicable, and they pushed on.

"This natural stair-way is nothing new to me," observed Red Tomahawk, a little disdainfully, when about half-way up. "I have climbed it before."

"Oh, have you?" grunted Rameau, looking back. "But don't be too top-loftical, Red Tom. There is still something about it you have never seen."

They at last reached a broad shelf in the face of the precipice, where a momentary pause was made.

"Good rock-shelf, this!" commented Louis, with his accustomed grunt. "May see it again in a different way. Now come on again; path easier now."

Reaching the top of the crag, whose outer was no less precipitous than its inner wall, a magnificent extent of the moon-lighted Bad Lands beyond burst upon their view.

As on the preceding evening, the watch-fire baldric was once more stretching out its curving chain of flame, link by link, while on the fortified plateau, which they could now look down upon, though at a distance of three or four miles, it was obvious that the weird ghost dance, spoken of by Two-Strike, was already under way, with all the clamor, frenzy, torch-wavings and other savage accessories.

"I've looked off before from this crest, too," observed Red Tomahawk, after a long pause. "Oh, yes, it was just here that young Mr. Jackford and I looked off. We saw it all, only it was by daylight, and without any ghost dance."

"Ugh! mebbe you saw, also, something else, which my little squaw here and I are about to show you," growled Louis, with a good-natured sneer. "Red Tom, you know it all, don't you? Chuck-a-popee, you take the lead."

The little squaw obediently stepped across the crest, and, to all appearances, instantly threw herself over the outer precipice.

"All right—no harm!" said Rameau, with a smile at the general start of horror among his companions. "Come on!"

Then, on following him, they perceived that Chuck-a-popee had simply jumped down to a shelf, or ledge, whence, hard in against the face of the perpendicular wall, a narrow path, cut or naturally worn in the rock, but with its top concealed by thick-twined vines until she had brushed them aside, wound and zigzagged its tortuous way downward.

They followed her lead down the path, being now solely lighted by the reflection of the watch-fire belt.

Arrived at another and broader shelf, their guide did not follow the path any further down, but, pulling away some more vines, disclosed a cave-entrance into the face of the crag.

"Also familiar to you, Red Tom?" queried Louis sarcastically. "Ugh! Saw all this before, of course?"

"No, nor even suspected it, Louis," was the good-humored response. "You and your little friend here take the—what is it?—the cake, the belt, the cheese, or whatever there is."

"Ugh! don't we though? But there is still more. Lead on, Chuck-a-popee."

Entering the cavern, which, by the faint glimmer of moonlight at its farther end, was seen to pierce entirely through the cliff, they proceeded about midway, where an extraordinary surprise awaited them. They were at the opening of a side-cave or cave-chamber, which was lighted by several pine-knot torches, stuck here and there in the walls, and in the center of which, a tall, gaunt, spectral-looking man was busily engaged in making a painstaking and most remarkable toilet.

A piece of looking-glass fixed against the rock, a basin of water on a three-legged stool, a small paint brush in his hand, and what appeared to be little pots of grease and paint disposed on a little shelf below the glass, together with several pieces of savage garmenting and ornamentation, other than those which he had already assumed in part, were his only accessories.

An old rifle leaned on another corner of the cave, and there was a bed of skins and some rude articles of furniture, indicating the cave as the strange abode of its yet stranger occupant.

The latter did not perceive the intruders at first, but when he did, their presence did not seem to disturb him in the least.

"Hullo! it is my little friend, Chuck-a-popee!" he exclaimed, in Sioux, turning a queer face toward them—the face of a white man, truly, but daubed over in the most extraordinary manner with grease, chalk and paint, so that it resembled the face of a walking corpse more than anything else. "What! got some friends with you too? Never mind; the more the merrier, so long as they don't trouble me." Here he came to a staring pause, at the end of which he rushed forward, shouting in the best of English, "Why, Buffalo Bill, my old friend! how are you? Good Lord! who'd have expected to see you here?" And, grasping the master-scout's two hands, he shook them vigorously.

Cody's astonishment, now that he recognized the strange recluse, in his turn, was no less pronounced.

"If it isn't Job Potter himself, may I miss my next Christmas dinner!" he exclaimed, responding heartily to the greeting offered him. "But let me ask you your own question first, old fellow. 'What's the meaning of this ridiculous masquerading? And what on earth are you doing here?'"

"I'm an Indian Messiah," responded the recluse, with a grin through his chalk and paint.

"Are you in earnest?"

"In dead earnest, Bill, though I confess to be growing daily more and more tired of my job. See?" he threw open a sort of sheet that was loosely thrown around him, and displayed a tight-fitting, white-bleached buckskin hunting shirt, on which were depicted, in black and ash-colored marking, the ribs of a skeleton, in startling keeping with the ghastly death's-head patch-work of his face and neck. "I'm fixed for business, as you perceive."

"Hullo!" exclaimed Cody. "Are you booked for the ghost-dancing that is beginning over yonder on the plateau to-night?"

"Sure! Shall start for the big village in half an hour. In fact, a pony and escort will be waiting for me half a mile from the outside foot of the precipice. I'm a big gun among the hostiles, these days, I can tell you; though it would never do to let them into the secret of my queer abiding-place up here in the crag, as a matter of course. Only this little squaw discovered that by the merest accident a short time since, and she has not betrayed my secret to any of 'em. You see, I first set the time for the dancing, issue my general instructions, and then hop in on the crazy fools sort of unexpected and mysterious-like, in this peculiar war-paint of mine. But why do you ask?"

"I'll tell you presently, old man," replied Bill, reflectively. "But it suddenly strikes me you may be of great service to me."

"You have only to command my services to have them. Do you think I can have forgotten the kindness you once did me over in Spokane? Not much, old friend. Job Potter may be a holy fraud now, and may have been a good-deal of a gambling rascal and dead-beat all his life, but he has never yet forgotten to return service for service, if the opportunity offered."

Col. Cody thanked him, and then introduced his followers,

besides giving the recluse an idea of his expedition into the Bad Lands! after which Potter related the various causes that had brought him into the unusual situation in which they found him.

In brief, the story was this: From having been a frontier gambler and hard character generally, Potter had several years since "reformed" so far as to give up his evil practices, to become a semi-religious crank and itinerant preacher on his own account. He frankly confessed to a rank hypocrisy in doing so, and that he had made it pay until hard luck had latterly stranded him in the Bad Lands; when—at first with the simple object of relieving himself of the perils menacing him on the part of the hostiles, into whose clutches he had fallen, and subsequently through a liking for the growing influence over them which he thus obtained—he had gone into the promulgation of the Messiah craze to the extent of his abilities, and thus far with unbounded success. Potter swore, however, that, to the extent of his power, he had, covertly at least, sought to use superstitious agency toward influencing the hostile chiefs to return to the Agency, but thus far, of course, without success.

At all events, Buffalo Bill finally resolved to make use of him, and the recluse promised that on the following night, when the ghost-dancing mania was likely to be at its culminating point, he would hit on a plan of introducing him and his party into the hostile camp, without bloodshed, which he hadn't a doubt would be successful.

After some further discussion as to the proposed plan, the party took their leave of the highly eccentric Mr. Job Potter, and passed on through the cliff.

They came out upon the inner precipice ledge, where they had once before paused in their initial ascent to the crest, and whence they speedily made their descent to the secret valley below.

Of course, Rameau and the little squaw might have led the party direct from the inner wall to the cavern of the recluse, without taking the trouble to surmount the summit; but then such a simple course would have given no opportunity to Louis for displaying the superiority of his knowledge over that of Red Tomahawk; and, moreover, the secret of the outside descent was worth knowing in itself.

They found Yankton Charley sitting apart from the camp-fire in the shadow of a rock, his cocked rifle across his knees, his watchful gaze fixed alternately on the fissure-entrance into the valley, and upon the neighboring tepees, where the squaws could be heard keeping up an excited chattering, diversified now and then by a dolorous wail or death-chant.

"What's up, Yankton?" demanded the leader. "Anything happened?"

"Nothin' pertickler, colonel," was the answer. "Only a lot er them murderous squaws hev been interviewin' me often enough, in ther thort that you uns hed kerried off ther little 'un yonder, prob'ly to do her some harm. An' then they've been makin' a big howl over ther disguised bucks we killed, an' whose bodies they've kerried inter ther tepees yonder. You kin hear 'em yelpin' even now."

"No harm in all that," observed Buffalo Bill, cheerfully. "The little squaw's contented now as when she helped Louis guide us up the cliff. And if the old ones in the tepees will rid us of the trouble of putting the dead bucks under ground, so much the better for us."

Chuck-a-popee was accordingly sent back to her squaw associates, with a goodly supply of spare provisions from the expedition's stock, such as could not but be vastly welcome, and, the Sibley tent having been erected betimes, guard duty was arranged for the night, after which the scouts sought their well-earned repose.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE HOSTILE CAMP ON THE PLATEAU.

The night passed without incident.

The following day, which it had been decided to spend quietly in the valley, pending the hoped-for success of the ensuing night, as promised by Job Potter, was only interrupted by a messenger from Two-Strike, who, unable to penetrate the obstructions which had been piled up therein, made his presence known on the other side of them by repeatedly discharging his gun.

"What is it?" demanded Colonel Cody, hastening into the fissure with his men, and speaking over and through the barricade, to the messenger, whose figure could be made out distinctly in the cavern-like dimness beyond.

"I am here with word to Big White Chief Bill from Two-Strike," was the reply, in very respectful Sioux.

"What word does Two-Strike send to me?"

"He once more begs you to give up your present purpose, and go back out of the Bad Lands. If you will only do this, he

sacredly pledges himself to give you the personal interview you so much desire."

"When and where?"

"Within a week, and at Pine Ridge Agency. He is tired of the hostilities. He will by that time return to the Agency, with all his people, and sue for peace on the sole condition that the past shall be forgiven, and the Indians be allowed to keep their guns and horses."

Buffalo Bill smiled. He was perfectly convinced that nothing could be further from the wily old head-chief's intention than such a speedy and summary surrender as was here proposed, and yet Two-Strike's anxiety to keep him and his men back from an attempt to push forward to the plateau was, in itself, sufficiently encouraging. Still, it was necessary to dissemble.

"Tell Two-Strike that I will think the matter over seriously," he called back in response. "Of course, his proposition fills me with joy, for the good of the country, and I only hope that he will do what he promises. Still, I will have to deliberate so far as it concerns me personally and the chief object of my expedition. You can say to Two-Strike from me, however, that my friends and I are very well content to rest where we are for the present."

The messenger seemed about retiring, when he suddenly broke out, not in Sioux, but in broken English, mixed with Cheyenne:

"Big White Chief!" he cried, a sudden anxiety in his tones, "I beg you to tell me something of my own account. Are there not some squaws encamped in the valley there?"

At the same moment Buffalo Bill recognized the man's voice.

"Hallo!" he exclaimed; "so you are the Cheyenne brave, Arrow-Flight, who saved me from Yellow Hair's treacherous wrath yesterday."

"Yes, yes," eagerly.

"Well, there are squaws in the valley here. What would you know about them?"

"Oh! I only want to know if my sister is still with them. She is a very little squaw, and her name is Chuck-a-popee."

"What! Chuck-a-popee is your little sister, then? Be of good heart, Arrow-Flight. We are grateful to her. She has done us a very great service, and we shall take good care of her."

Arrow-Flight seemed to be overjoyed at what he heard.

"May the Great Spirit bless you, Big White Chief Bill!" he cried. "Ah, I know you word is truthful, that you will do what you say. But the little Chuck-a-popee is very, very dear to me. Oh, if I only had her with me back on the plateau. I would soon devise some means of escaping with her back to Rosebud, far away from this horrible region. I would long since have run away, but for the miserable thought of leaving her behind, to starve or be killed."

"Arrow-Flight, can I trust in you?" inquired the master-scout, after a moment's reflection.

"While I live, White Chief."

"Then try to be among the hostile guards of the entrance up into their village to-night, between eight and ten, and give no alarm as to what you may see or suspect."

"I can do better than that for you, White Chief Bill. I can get even to command the sentinels of the pass, and that I will do. I swear it."

"A thousand thanks, Arrow-Flight! And perhaps even the little Chuck-a-popee will be with us then."

"Ah, White Chief Bill!" with a joyful exclamation; "then I would die to serve you in and out of the hostile camp. But you will see. Farewell!"

"Adieu!"

"Better and better!" commented Cody, on accompanying his men back across the valley to camp. "Chuck-a-popee was our first Godsend, Job Potter, the bogus Messiah, our next—though I heartily wish he might be in some better line of humbugging and perhaps this young brave, Arrow-Flight, will prove our third."

"I think he will, colonel," said Red Tomahawk, confidently. "Chankapteclan is reputed at Rosebud as being both faithful and brave."

"Nothin' like hev'in' a friend in an enemy's camp," observed Buckskin Jack, while both Yankton and Louis nodded or grunted their acquiescence in the sentiment. "It's better'n a square drink when you're feelin' shaky after makin' a night of it 'ith too much of ther oh-be-joyful."

That afternoon Buffalo Bill, guided up the cliff solely by the little Chuck-a-popee, had another interview with the odd recluse of the lofty mid-crag cave, during which the details for the coming night's adventure were thoroughly discussed and agreed on.

Promptly, as night closed in, everything was got in readiness in the valley.

Red Tomahawk, though not a little against his inclinations,

was to be left behind to keep an eye on the tepees and the animals; for it had been decided to proceed in the wake of the false Messiah on foot; and the known hatred for the Indian policeman by the majority of the hostiles was such as to be deemed best that he should not endeavor to enter the fortified camp with the others.

When ready for the start, the remaining four scouts presented a pronounced transformation of aspect.

Buffalo Bill and Buckskin Jack, wearing Indian blankets over their rifles, and their long hair tucked up under their hats, in which sundry eagle-feathers had been stuck, looked a pretty fair counterfeit presentment of a couple of hostile braves in the semi-civilized winter toggery that was so common among the latter when attainable, and a liberal application of war-paint streakings had not been forgotten to give an added air of verisimilitude to their disguise.

Louis Rameau was rigged up in the squaw's costume which Buckskin had obtained from his visit with Cody to Red Cloud's tepees.

But the most astonishing transformation of all was that of Yankton Charley, who was got up in the ghost-dancing dress. Indeed, painted, chalked up, and thus attired, he looked almost as ghastly and terrifying as Job Potter himself at his professional best, so to speak; only, in addition, no one could have suspected him of being other than a full-blooded Indian on religious excitement bent, when he had once thrown aside his blanket and executed an impromptu dance, with appropriate yells and gesticulations, by the camp-fire, in the way of rehearsal.

"You'll do, Yank, if you don't over do it," observed the master-scout, as the last preparations were being made. "You must be careful on that point. Otherwise, it must be confessed, you look wild enough and hideous enough to take the cake from the boss-prancers in the spiritual ring."

"You're not so purty yourself as ordinary, colonel," replied the neophyte, with a final pirouette or two. "But I'll do my dog-gone level-best ter keep up ther reppertation of ther gang, you kin depend on that."

The fact of the sham-dancer and bogus squaw retaining their rifles was not a little in contradiction to the characters they were assuming, it was true; but, everything considered, it had been deemed best to risk the incongruity.

The little squaw, Chuck-a-popee, took no small part in these preparations, and her delight and pride in knowing that she was to accompany the masqueraders were unbounded.

"I will guide you!" she cried, "I know the way to the plateau so well that I could find it in among the intervening valleys in the dark. And then will not my brave brother be there to help you, too?"

The other squaws from the adjoining tepees—most of them hideously old, and doubtless with their sympathies wholly with the hostiles—together with the children, were grouped at a short distance from the fire, regarding with stupid curiosity the proceedings, which they evidently did not understand.

Finally everything was in readiness, and the difficult route up the face of the cliff was begun.

The sham Messiah was putting the finishing touches upon his own extraordinary toilet when the disguised scouts reached the entrance of his cavern chamber, in which, in addition to the illuminating pine-knots, he had kindled a brisk fire, for the weather had again turned off very cold and raw.

"Aha!" said he, critically surveying the party; "this is something like, and I haven't a doubt you will pass muster. I have been turning things over in my mind, Mr. Cody, and think now it will be best for you and your party to follow close upon my heels. It will seem as if I had picked you up while you were on your way from some other ghost-dance outside of the Bad Lands, and I will so make it understood as we pass on up the side of the plateau."

"All right, Mr. Potter," was the response. "We are ready as soon as you are."

Fortunately, it was another moonlight night, and the belt of signal fires also contributed not a little of its reflected light as the party made their way down the outer precipice, with the dancing-master, as one might say, of Mr. Potter, and the little squaw, Chuck-a-popee, in the lead.

The first named carried no arms, but was provided with a long, stout wand, decorated with little buckskin ribbons and strings of beads.

"It's my divining wand, or my official staff, whichever you please," he had explained to his companions, with his semi-reckless, semi-cynical smile. "Not much good in a regular fight, perhaps, but answering my holy purpose well enough in an emergency, as you may have the chance of observing sooner or later."

A light snow began to fall as they quitted the foot of the precipice, and a cold wind blew across the desolate and chaotic

wastes from the north-west; but they were enabled to make pretty rapid progress along the trail that was presently struck.

Arriving at an elevated but sheltered point, they came upon four mounted Indians in waiting, with a spare pony, whose saddle and other gear were especially fine.

The "Messiah" at once pranced toward them, with a lively pirouetting movement, at the same time giving utterance to some gibberish-like incantation in the Sioux dialect; the escort meanwhile receiving him with many manifestations of superstitious respect and fear.

However, when the holy man had sprung into the saddle, one of them, with a half-suspicious frown, ventured to ask:

"You are not alone, as has been your custom, holy sir. Who and what are these strangers that we see with you to-night?"

"Leave it to your betters to ask such questions, unbeliever!" roared out Potter, fetching him a whack over the shoulders with his staff. "What! am I to give an account of myself and my pilgrim followers to such as you? Here, you —!" calling one of the others by name; "gallop on ahead, and advise the chiefs of my coming, along with these worshipers from the dance ring on the Porcupine River. And let them see to it that the dance is well under way and everything in readiness for my sacred ceremonies by the time we arrive."

The messenger selected at once spurred away in obedience to the command, while the grumbler hung his head under the reproach, his two companions even going so far as to kiss the sacred staff that was still being flourished menacingly over their humbled heads.

Then all proceeded sedately in the direction of the plateau, the disguised scouts and their little squaw-guide finding no difficulty in keeping up with the cavalcade on foot.

At last, a final deep valley being traversed, they came out suddenly upon a comparatively wide, open plain, at whose farther extremity rose the towering sides of the naturally battlemented plateau, its lower end glittering with the gleam of many camp-fires, the guarded zig-zag path leading up to the village being, moreover, studded on either side with flaring torches, showing the sentinels guarding it at intervals.

Besides, there was a tremendous hubbub going on. The guards were yelling out their wild fanatical chant, the rude music of the ghost-dance itself came floating down on the cold wind, and the flashing torches of the spectators around the ghost-ring could be seen moving tumultuously hither and thither up over the ragged crest of the elevation.

"Follow on at a run!" the fakir-in-chief called back over his bronco's crupper. "We must signalize our arrival with a great demonstration. The more you yell and jump about the better, only be sure to yell religiously and in good Sioux. You can do the jumping about in any language you durned please."

This was the "reformed" Mr. Job Potter's parting little joke.

Then he put his pony to a slow gallop, riding in advance of his escort, while shouting out and gesticulating like a madman; his pedestrian followers acting up to his unique instructions with a zeal and exuberance worthy of a better cause.

"To think that even superstitious Indians can be taken in by such outrageous mummery!" thought the master-scout, and doubtless more than one of his companions, while this triumphal entry was in progress. "Good Lord! it would be a disgrace to the intelligence of as many South Sea Islanders."

But it answered the purpose just the same, which was the only thing to be considered.

Arrived at the foot of the blazing stair-like causeway, the procession made a momentary halt, while the guards began to open a passage for it up the path, shouting and singing, even the rocks far above and far along the plateau-verge being crowded with expectant Indians, vociferating their greetings, or giving utterance to meaningless howls, while furiously waving their torches.

"It's a go!" called back the fakir to his friends, in English. "The dauged fools bite like so many gudgeons. This ovation is for your arrival, no less than mine. Only keep up the jig, my pilgrims!"

Then they all went yelling and dancing and gesticulating up the steep like so many Bedlamites.

In fact the ruse was working so successfully, and everything was going on so swimmingly that Buffalo Bill could scarcely realize the good-fortune before it was an accomplished fact.

Arrow-Flight, in command of the main guard, which was posted half-way up the path, recognized him and his companions immediately, and, in running out to grasp his sister by the arm, and draw her to his side, he found occasion to whisper:

"Bravely done, White Chief! I shall be off duty here very soon, and if you should want me, I shall be at the ghost ring, watching for a signal."

Then the plateau was reached, Two-Strike and his head chiefs joined with the mob of hostiles in shouting out their

greetings; and, springing from his bronco's back, Job Potter led the way direct for the ghost ring, whirling his staff above his head, and bawling out his incantations at the top of his voice.

CHAPTER XIV.

AT THE GHOST RING.

The ring was in the very center of the hostile village, which was of most unusual extent, being composed of several hundred tepees, all brilliantly lighted by numerous rousing camp-fires, blazing here and there at frequent intervals.

Two young chiefs and one squaw were already dancing, for the benefit of a huge mob of savages standing eight or ten deep around the sacred circle.

Half-naked, their faces and bodies smeared with paint, chalk and charcoal marks, they were hopping about like human grasshoppers, and occasionally giving utterance to loud, ecstatic whoops, while the crowd shouted or screamed in sympathy, and a particularly wild-looking trio of old medicine men, throned on a sort of rude staging at one side, furnished the brass band accompaniment for the extraordinary ceremonies.

That is, these last were banging and pounding, as if their lives depended on it, one on a regular Indian drum, another on an old disused hotel gong, and another on a dilapidated and more holey than righteous copper kettle, with a rusty pair of fire-tongs, occasionally diversifying the hideous clamor of their discordance by shrieking out: "Wakantanka is here! Lo, his spirit is upon us! See; it enters into the bodies of the dancers, and their souls are on fire! Hurrah for Wakantanka! Here, too, is his Messiah, one of his special messengers, once more among us! Keep it up, brothers! Glory to the Great Spirit! He is about to sweep away the despoiling whites, the buffalo will return, and the land will be once more solely for us, the red men, his chosen people. Jump and dance, dance and jump! Our day is at hand!" *et al.*

In fury and craziness, and apart from the musical attempts, the scene even out-Heroded a camp-meeting saturnalia among the ignorant blacks of the cotton and sugar belts before the war, and for sheer incoherence and *grotesquerie* was altogether beyond adequate description.

But the wildest efforts of the fanatical dancers paled their ineffectual fires when Mr. Job Potter, the boss fakir, bounded into the magic circle with a series of kangaroo-like leaps, idiotic gesticulations and demoniac howls, that altogether, so to speak, knocked the crankish spots out of anything that could have preceded it.

Yankton Charley, in his ghost-toggery, and Louis Rameau, in his fighting squaw's dress, followed, twirling their guns over their heads, snapping their fingers, screeching like factory steam-whistles, and jumping about, and even over one another, like a brace of lunatics at leap-frog.

It was a Fiji fetish-dance transferred to the North American wilderness, or a Donnybrook Fair jamboree, with a fanatical veneering.

At all events it was the dramatic success of the Bad Lands for that evening, away beyond any extravagance that had yet gone before it in the ghost-circus of the hostile fastness, and the spectators fairly howled themselves hoarse in approval.

However, Buffalo Bill, who had somewhat subsided into inconspicuous desuetude at the least thickly crowded side of the ring, was not altogether satisfied.

"Our men are overdoing the thing," he managed to say, in a low voice, to Buckskin Jack, who was silently grinning and chuckling at his elbow. "Look at Yankton, especially. Even the most ridiculous of the genuine dancers can never indulge in such stupendous monkey-shines. He is acting like an electrified bull-frog. And then no really spiritualized squaw in the world could ever get off those steam-engine screeches that Louis so frequently indulges in, even apart from his brandishing his Winchester in that idiotic manner. Why can't they take pattern from Potter, in whose madness there is a certain method, at all events? I feel strongly tempted to run over there, and boot them both out of the ring!"

"Thet'd be wuss yet, colonel," counseled Buckskin. "Let 'em jump. It's better'n a bull-fight. And he seemed to keep from exploding with no little difficulty.

But at this juncture Short Bull, No Neck, and Kicking Bear strode past, and the former was heard to say: "Queer sort of dancers, these new-comers, anyway! Their rifles are Winchesters—of the newest pattern, too; and then, who ever heard of a squaw with a Winchester before? I never did."

"You heard that?" demanded Cody of his companion, when the group had passed on.

"Yes," was the reply, serious enough now. "What's ther remedy, colonel?"

"There is little Chuck-a-popee watching us from the other side. Louis should join her at once in locating the tepee wherein Miss Delmar is imprisoned. Yankton can go later, and then seek his opportunity of informing me, when the dancers shall have become so numerous that our absence will not be noted. Prance over the line and manage some way to give them the tip. In the meantime, I must find some means of having my coveted talk with Two-Strike alone."

"Good enough, Bill!" And, with a bound, a yell, and a gorilla-like twirl of his rifle over his head, shillelah-fashion, he was over the line among the dancers, who, seized by the contagion one by one, by this time numbered eighteen or twenty in all.

Cody was presently relieved by seeing Louis quit the ring and join Chuck-a-popee, apparently without exciting suspicious observation, after which the pair disappeared together.

A moment later there was a friendly touch on his arm, and he saw the young Cheyenne, Arrow-Flight, at his side.

"Big White Chief Bill, the half-breed, is off with my little sister, you doubtless know whither," whispered the young man. "I can guide you after them to Big Knife's distant squaw tepee at any moment. See; the excitement waxes so fierce and confused that no one will notice. Shall we go?"

"Not yet, Arrow-Flight," was the master-scout's reply. "I must be somewhat sure of the lay of the land behind me first, and would therefore have my interview with Two-Strike at once and alone, if possible. Do you see anything of him?"

"I did a few minutes ago. Wait! He was with those three chiefs over yonder. You see them?"

"Yes, Kicking Bear, Little Wound, and Elk-Killer; you mean those?"

"Yes; and wherever Elk-Killer is Two-Strike is not far away. He ought to be called Following-Dog, instead of Elk-Killer, for no one ever heard of his killing any elk, and he is so much at Two-Strike's heels that everybody laughs at him. Ah, there is Two-Strike himself now! You see him?"

"Yes."

The old head-chief had, in fact, just made his appearance among the others. He wore his accustomed stern, meditative, and half-troubled look; and, indeed, it was generally thought that he was too intelligent to really share the Messiah superstition with the rest, looking upon it secretly as the pernicious and absurd humbug that it really was.

"Arrow-Flight," continued Buffalo Bill, hurriedly, "couldn't you manage to get Two-Strike to go to his tepee alone for some ten minutes?"

"Yes, White Chief Bill," confidently; "it shall somehow be managed."

"Wait! Which is his tepee?"

"You note the two tepees, one larger than the other, standing off together there, close to the deep and narrow ravine, far to the right?"

"Yes."

"The larger is his, the smaller for his squaws; for the old man mostly prefers to dwell alone. I will signal you from the other side, so!" making a peculiar gesture! "when I shall have got him alone in his lodge. But you must be on the lookout for Elk-Killer."

"All right. But wait yet a moment. Big Knife! have you seen him hereabouts?"

"No; Big Knife seldom or never comes. I don't believe he really cares any more for the ghost-dancing than does Two-strike himself. Besides, when night comes he is too busy with looking after his fair prisoner, with his other squaws in the distant teepee. His cousins, Hump-Dog, Run-Loose, and Little Thunder, with several others, assist him in his watch, and they are always on the alert."

"Go on, then, Arrow-Flight; I shall eagerly await your signal."

Arrow-Flight backed away, in order to skirt around behind the backs of the vociferating spectators of the dance, and presently Buffalo Bill had the satisfaction of seeing him speak to Two-Strike and take him away.

Yankton Charley and Buckskin Jack were still mingling with the dancers, who were every moment growing more numerous and more excited, the apparently tireless boss fakir (it seemed like a sacrilege to dignify him with the title of "Messiah," even in derision,) still leading the insane rout with loud-voiced invocations and the most extravagant of antics.

Elk-Killer had also disappeared almost as soon as Two-Strike, but the master-scout had taken no notice of this.

In a short time, the latter caught the anxiously expected signal from Arrow-Flight, and, pushing his way back through the crowd with as careless an air as he could assume, hurried around the circumference of the ring to meet him.

"Two-Strike is alone in his tepee now," said the young

Cheyenne. "I persuaded him that he was not looking well, and ought to lie down. Hurry up, though; for there is no telling how long he will remain there."

"I go at once. In the meantime, do you try to get my two friends, Buckskin and Yankton, out of the ring, and then meet me at the corner of the ravine where the two tepees are standing. Will you do this?"

"Sure, White Chief Bill!"

They accordingly separated.

The two tepees in question were well out from the thick of the village, and the ravine, or gulch, to whose ragged edge their backs were presented, was less a ravine than a chasm, long, narrow, apparently very deep, and cutting the plateau almost in two from the north, in a zigzag direction reaching, in a broader and shallower form, almost into the center of the camp.

As the master-scout hurried along its edge, after getting out from the glare of the camp-fires and the more closely built lodges, there was scarcely a sign of life in the immediate vicinity, though both tepees showed lights in their interiors, and, as he paused to listen, there was a murmur, apparently of female voices, from the smaller habitation.

Then he strode directly to the entrance of the larger tepee, pushed aside the loose-hanging buffalo-hide flap, and entered with a stern and frowning air, coolly standing his rifle up in a convenient corner as he did so.

For warmth, a small fire of scrub-wood was burning and smoking in the center of the pyramidal apartment, thus affording the only illumination there was, and the old chief was reclining, with half-closed eyes, on a heap of skins on the farther side of it.

He at once looked up, however, on hearing the intruding footstep, and then, not recognizing the intruder, he gave an exclamation, and made a spring for his rifle.

But, before he could reach it, the great plainsman's iron grip was on his wrist, and his stern, menacing voice was in his ear.

"Peace, vain old man!" hissed the voice; "would you struggle against Fate itself? It is I, Buffalo Bill, and we meet at last, in spite of your shuffling subterfuges and cowardly evasions, as I promised you that we should. So; what do you make of it, now?"

What was there in that low-hissed voice, that grim, uncompromising aspect, that seemed to strike the veteran, wily old chief with sudden and nameless fear?

At first he seemed wholly bewildered, but, as he recognized his visitor, he managed to gather himself together a bit.

"I know you now, Buffalo Bill," he growled, sulkily. "I will not harm you, nor raise any alarm."

"Right well I know that," returned Cody, casting him from him with a contemptuous laugh. "Fofsworn old scoundrel that you are! it is because you dare not!"

CHAPTER XV.

TWO-STRIKE'S SECRET.

"Dare not?" echoed the old chief, with a sudden start, and yet with something of a proud disdain, for, if more cunning than valiant in his old age, he had been brave and hardy in his warrior youth. "White Chief Bill, you ought to know me to be no coward."

"A long treasured secret of conscious crime can make a coward of any man," replied the master-scout. "Sit down there and let me talk to you," indicating the couch of skins, and Two-Strike sullenly obeyed. "You have your black secret of the past—a secret which, if known, could hang you!—and your knowledge that it is known to me alone, of all men other than yourself, places you in my power. Do you hear, chief?—in my power!"

The old Indian cowered under the burning and accusing gaze that accompanied the menacing words.

"Yes, yes, I know, Buffalo Bill," he muttered feebly. "But since then we have been good friends, and you promised never to betray me."

"On one condition," angrily; "a condition that you would never make or instigate a war upon the whites, and that you have broken!"

"Listen. Years ago, when on a lonely hunting expedition, and with the fire-water demon in your brain, you foully murdered in cold blood three men, while they slept beside a trail-side spring in the heart of the Black Hills wilderness. Your object was the gold which they carried on their persons. I was the sole witness of the crime, though from a distance, and when it was too late to interfere."

"I covered you with my revolver, all red-handed, and then held you my prisoner while you slept off your drunkenness."

Then, when you awoke to a realization of your crime, and besought me on your bended knees to keep your secret from the world, I promised to do so, on the condition I have named, and with what motives?"

"In the first place, I recognized—which you did not—your victims as murderers themselves, criminals of the deepest dye of whom the world was well rid, escaped convicts from a distant prison, their very gold, which you had stained your soul to obtain in turn, the proceeds of a brutal robbery, involving murder, in another Territory. In the next place, I thought that, by keeping your secret on the condition I imposed, I might be instrumental of an immense benefit to both the white settlers and your own people by preserving the peace ever thereafter between them, and at the same time without robbing justice of any great amount of her just dues by abstaining from declaring the means by which those miscreants had come to their ends at your miscreant hands!"

Two-Strike, who had been growing more and more moved, gave a great groan, and looked up, his withered and wrinkled cheeks quivering with emotion.

"No, no; not that, Buffalo Bill!" he faltered, raising his hands half-supplicatingly. "Stigmatize me as mad, crazy, wild, but not knowingly as a miscreant. Not that, not that!"

The master-scout was secretly touched, but he went on remorselessly:

"Hear me through. Though your victims were so criminal and worthless, at least one of them had rich and influential Eastern friends. These moved heaven and earth, offering great rewards for the delivery of the slayer to justice. Still, I maintained the silence I had pledged."

"Even now, though, and you must know and feel it; the sword of justice yet hangs over you, dangling by a single thread. And even were you to come into the Agency, with your crack-brained, superstition-ridden people here, and be forgiven this wholesale crime of yours against the Government, you know that you are still in my power, that a single word from me could send you to the gallows for that old, long-secret crime."

The master-scout purposely exaggerated his case here, for the crime of which he spoke had long been forgotten, and it was more than doubtful if the old chief would have been called to account for it under any circumstances. But Two-Strike could know nothing of this, and it was only fair that his fears should thus be played upon in the interest of a thoroughly good and honorable cause.

"But listen, chief," continued Cody. "You are still anxious, notwithstanding the pledge you have broken and the deceitful, shuffling manner in which you have avoided and deceived me—you are still anxious, I presume, that I should keep this secret of yours inviolate?"

"Great God, yes!" cried Two-Strike, springing to his feet with an earnestness that was unmistakable. "Oh, my friend, I will say anything, do anything!"

"I want deeds, not words. Save in the nature of an oath that you will not dare to break," sternly. "Hark you, then; I want you to promise me two things, on an oath that I myself will administer to you. Will you do it?"

"If in my power, yes," humbly. "What do you demand?"

"First and foremost, a renewal of your promise to come into the Agency and sue for peace just as soon as you can arrange these diverse elements under your control so as to enable you to do so with success. I recognize and appreciate the difficulties that you must now master in order to accomplish this result, and am willing to make allowances for them. Will you promise this?"

"Yes," slowly. "I am really tired of this miserable business. Yes, Buffalo Bill, I will swear to perform this task to the best of my ability. What is the other thing?"

"You know my special business here. Why have you permitted Big Knife to detain that young lady here on the plateau?"

The old chief moved uneasily in the seat on the couch, which he had resumed.

"White Chief Bill, you do not, or will not understand," he said, earnestly. "The young men, the hot heads are more and more in control here. In minor affairs, such as this, my rule is but nominal. Big Knife and his cousins have great influence with this disturbing element in our camp. Direct interference on my part, in this young lady's favor (she is not being badly treated, by the way, apart from being kept in restraint) might bring half the best fighting material I have in open antagonism with me. However, what is it you want me to do? I will do the very best I can to meet your wishes, though I tell you frankly that my best will not be a great deal."

Cody could not but feel the force and earnestness of what the old chief said; and he was, moreover, loth to exact of him more than he could be able to perform.

"How far back from the village," he asked, "is the tepee

where Big Knife and his personal adherents stand guard over the young lady."

"About one mile."

"Anything else there besides the one tepee?"

"Oh, yes; the corral where Big Knife keeps his ponies, and a sort of lodge adjoining it where he and his friends mostly sleep. The rest of his following are here in camp."

"Two-Strike, I ask this of you: That, in exactly one hour from this time, as near as you can guess, you induce your howling dervish—or your Messiah, as you call him—to lead the ghost-dance out of the ghost ring, well on through the village, past the guarded path leading down to the plain, and well on to the extreme southern point of the plateau. This will give my friends and me the chance we require."

"I know what you mean," said Two-Strike, after a pause.

"Yes, I will do as you wish. But I warn you that I cannot be responsible for such of our young men as remain behind the dancers."

"I will take my chances as to that. And will you also promise to have three lighted torches tossed successively high up in the air from the top of this ravine here, as a signal that the dance is being conducted as I demand."

"Yes, I promise that, too."

Buffalo Bill then administered the oath to him, and at its conclusion Two-Strike grasped his hand.

"You will still keep my secret?" the latter inquired, eagerly.

"I swear to do it, Two-Strike, on the conditions I have imposed."

"You will find me faithful, Buffalo Bill," was the response.

"Leave me now. I am no longer a young man, and must rest a little."

This closed the extraordinary interview, and, with another grasp of the old chief's hand, the master-scout picked up his rifle, and, fairly satisfied with the result, silently quitted the tepee.

A moment later, while skirting the grim edge of the chasm, there was a half-hissing, half-guttural exclamation in his ear, and he wheeled to find himself suddenly confronted by a stalwart warrior, his uplifted tomahawk in one hand, his hunting-knife in the other.

Buffalo Bill had been warned against Elk-Killer, and here was the intermeddling chief murderously confronting him at last, cunning and ferocity about equally striving for the mastery in his savage face.

"Hallo!" said the scout, in the most genial tone in the world;

"It's you, is it, Elk-Killer? What's the matter with you?"

"You speak good Sioux, Buffalo Bill," was the grim reply.

"I listened close. Two-Strike's black secret is now mine, no less than yours."

"Ah, indeed?"

"Yes; and after I have killed you, he will be in my power exclusively, White Chief Bill!" with a flourish of the hatchet; "*I am for you!*"

"Wait just a second, Elk-Killer," tauntingly. "Are you such a coward that you dare not attempt my death without these chiefs to help you?"

"What chiefs do you mean?"

"Short Bull and Crow-Dog, who are even now behind you."

Elk-Killer twisted around his head, with a sort of surprise, and at the same instant Buffalo Bill sprang at his throat, like a wolf of the wood, dodged under the hatchet-arm, and, whipping out his hunting-knife, while simultaneously dropping his gun, drove it, hilt-deep, into the treacherous Indian's heart.

In less than a minute after Elk-Killer had announced his murderous intention, he was tumbled, a dead man, into the abyss.

Hastening on, Buffalo Bill was so fortunate as to find Buckskin Jack, Yankton Charley, and Arrow-Flight awaiting him at the head of the ravine, according to his appointment with the latter.

"Come!" said he, "I think I have made our rear comparatively secure, but no time is to be lost. Let us follow in the footsteps of our Louis and the little squaw."

They succeeded in passing back through the village without attracting attention, and, ten or fifteen minutes later, under Arrow-Flight's guidance, came in sight of the lonely tepee and its adjacent corral, by the dim light of the moon through a light-falling veil of snow.

No watch or camp-fire lent its cheerful light to the desolate loneliness of the scene.

The village camp-fires were but dimly discernible far behind; the curving baldrick of signal-fires had long since faded out from over the black face of the ill-omened land.

Still there was a light observable in the tepee, and a fainter one in the sort of shed that adjoined the corral, and in the latter the ponies could be heard champing their miserable food, or moving about uneasily.

They made their approaches with the utmost caution, for there was no telling how many fellow-guardians Big Knife might have with him besides his three cousins; and it was also desirable, if not absolutely indispensable, that the rescue should be effected, if possible, without firing a shot, however much blood it might be necessary to otherwise shed.

At last there was a low and familiar whistle, in imitation of a night-hawk's call, and Louis Rameau approached them from a hiding-place, almost on a line between the tepee and the corral.

"Good," he whispered, with his habitual grunt. "Glad you are come, but there are many of them."

"How many?" inquired Buffalo Bill.

"Nine."

"Well, that's better than nine hundred. Where are they?"

"Three there, including Big Knife himself," pointing to the tepee. "Making their rounds outside. Six more in there," indicating the low shed, or lodge. "Playing cards, those. Ugh!"

"Where is Chuck-a-popee?"

Louis pointed to the corral shed again.

"What is she doing there?"

"Making merry with the six chiefs, while she doctors their rifles on the sly."

"How about the other rifles at the tepee yonder?"

"I doctored them myself. They were leaned against a rock while Big Knife and his two cousins talked. Still, it wasn't easy. Ugh!"

As he finished speaking, a shadowy slight figure was seen stealing crouchingly toward them, and with a sort of halting movement.

"Ah, there is Chuck-a-popee!" said Buffalo Bill.

But it was nothing of the sort.

They were standing in a little nook, formed by a half-circle of tall rocks.

As the crouching figure came among them into this place, and straightened up, the scouts perceived, to their no small astonishment, that it was the veiled young squaw whom they had seen with Big Knife and his returning raiders, just before their entrance into the Bad Lands.

"I said that we might meet again unexpectedly, White Chief Bill," said a low and musical voice. "Seel!"

She snatched away her veil, revealing herself as Big Knife's sister, Malk-wah-kee, the little, lame medicine woman.

"What?" was all that Cody could say, while shaking her hand with great heartiness. "Then it was you whom we saw the other evening then, and you were then first making your way into this God-forsaken region?"

A strange light, which had suddenly sprung into the young squaw's refined face, as strangely quitted it, leaving it serious and thoughtful, if not somewhat troubled, as well.

"Yes," she gravely answered; "I felt it my duty to look personally after the welfare of the young lady who is my brother's prisoner. I have been with her constantly since then. It was through me that she was enabled to send you the birch-bark missive by means of our good friend Arrow-Flight here. She is, Heaven be praised, quite well, and impatient for your rescuing approach. I can help you materially, I think, and I wish to do so on one condition."

"That your brother's life shall be spared, if possible, I suppose."

"That is it. These others with him are criminals; their hands already deeply dyed with innocent blood in times past. Big Knife has, in his abduction, been mainly misled by his misapprehension at the outset, and since then by his vanity."

"It is an agreement, Malk-wah-kee," said Buffalo Bill, gently, for there was a suggestion of silent suffering in the young woman's soft lineaments and eyes that both puzzled and pained him. "A bloody fight is doubtless indispensable, but Big Knife's life shall be spared, unless he should throw it away by his own madness or impetuosity. You all hear this?" and he turned to his followers, who silently nodded.

"Oh, thank you, White Chief Bill!" exclaimed Malk-wah-kee. "I must go back to my charge now. May Heaven speed your undertaking in the cause of innocence and distress."

She seized his hand, seemed just to brush it with the breath of her warm lips, and was gone through the light-falling snow.

"Good leetle squaw, thet, colonel," observed Buckskin Jack, eying the master-scout with a peculiar look. "An' she's got a secret thet you orter guess, 'r else I'm a fool."

"A secret!" echoed Cody, mystified. "What secret?"

"Oh, nothin' pertickler, 'f you can't understand 'thout bein' told. But look! yonder comes the other leetle squaw, Chuck-a-popee, f'm ther direction o' ther corral."

CHAPTER XVI.

TO THE RESCUE—MALK-WAH-KEE'S SECRET.

Chuck-a-popee put in a smiling appearance, nodding proudly to Buffalo Bill and his scouts, while grasping her brother's extended hand.

"The six warriors, they still play white man's cards in lodge," she said, simply. "But their guns won't go off in a hurry. It is all done."

It was necessary to make a division of the attacking force, small as it was; for it would never do that a single guardian should escape to give warning at the village.

Louis Rameau, Yankton Charley, and Arrow-Flight were accordingly dispatched to look after the men in the lodge, while Buffalo Bill and Buckskin Jack took it upon themselves to take care of Big Knife and his two friends at the tepee.

"Remember!" was Cody's final command as the separation took place; "no firing, under any circumstance, if it can possibly be avoided."

As for little Chuck-a-popee, she sort of faded off to one-side through the falling snow, but there was little doubt that she would haunt the trio of which her brother was a member.

The tepee was erected on the north side of the plateau, not far from its precipitous and rock-bristling edge, where a few scrub-trees likewise found a precarious footing.

Cody and Buckskin approached it with the utmost caution.

Big Knife and his companions were presently seen conversing near the entrance, the former being easily distinguished by his superior size and bearing.

The scouts waited until the trio had sauntered to the opposite side of the tepee.

Then, running noiselessly forward, Buffalo Bill dodged behind a friendly rock, where he set down his rifle, while Buckskin remained unconcealed, and gave utterance to a cough.

The sentries came bounding in sight in an instant.

"A spy!" exclaimed Hump-Dog, the foremost, instantly leveling his gun and snapping it, but without result, while his companions were equally unfortunate. "A white man at that, and

Buckskin was a holy terror in a close fight. He had dropped his gun and launched out, like a panther, the words being summarily cut short by his hunting-knife being plunged into their utterer's throat.

Simultaneously, Buffalo Bill had darted out, staggering the next comer, Run-Loose, by a tremendous left-handed fist blow in the mouth, while trying at the same time to trip up Big Knife by a swift wrestling feint with his foot.

But Big Knife, who was a noted athlete among his fellow-braves, was not to be caught in that way, and he also recognized his antagonist on the instant.

"What, White Chief Bill?" he roared. "Ah, that accursed sister of mine has played me false." And, grinding his teeth, he cast aside his useless gun, after snapping it again and again in vain, and rushed like an avalanche upon his foe, knife in hand.

But the Indian doesn't live who can successfully tackle the prince of plainsmen in a hand-to-hand encounter.

Cody promptly closed with him on the verge of the precipice, still mindful, however, of his promise to Malk-wah-kee.

There was a terrific grapple for the mastery, and then the great scout, avoiding more than once a vicious stroke from his antagonist's knife, got the upper hand, and knocked him clean out and down over the rocks by a flush blow behind the ear.

Doubting not that the tumble had broken his adversary's back or neck, but having no time to regret it for the little lame medicine woman's sake, Cody turned to perceive Buckskin and Run-Loose rolling over and over on the snow in a regular wild-cat death-grapple.

He quickly relieved his friend by snatching up the warrior's tomahawk, and splitting open its owner's skull with it, while Buckskin got on his feet, out of breath, but unhurt.

Then, as there were indications of a desperate fight going on in the vicinity of the corral lodge, both snatched up their guns, and dashed off in that direction.

Two hostiles were dead on the ground when they got there; but then so was Arrow-Flight, or apparently so, with his little sister wailing upon his prostrate form; while Louis and Yankton were back to back, and holding off the remaining four by the skin of their teeth, the latter dancing around the pair with brandished gun, knife and, tomahawk.

Buckskin at once knifed one assailant in the back, while Cody

jumped for the most formidable-looking of the remaining three, who proved to be the last of Big Knife's cousins, Little Thunder, a particularly wiry and murderous red specimen of the *genus* tough.

The latter hurled his knife, javelin fashion, though without effect, and then, with a whoop, went in on his sand and muscle, with uplifted tomahawk.

Bill countered his rush, however, by a tremendous jab in the midriff with his gun, and, as he doubled up and buried his hatchet in the snow with a howl of pain, let him have the knife in the side of the neck, so that he instantly toppled over, a dead cock in the pit, and half decapitated in the bargain.

Turning to see how his companions might be faring, the master-scout was just in time to see the last of the six receiving his quietus by a tomahawk-stroke at the hands of Yankton Charley, and the victory was complete.

"Any one of our side hurt?" demanded Buffalo Bill.

No, not seriously, though Louis Rameau had been pretty well pounded about the head with the stock of a broken gun before polishing off his last man, while the brave Cheyenne, Arrow-Flight, was still motionless on the ground, with Chuck-a-popee on his breast, though there was no longer a wail or sob from her.

"Poor little squaw!" exclaimed the master-scout, stooping to raise the girl; "she must have fainted, and—Good God!" he glanced but once at her side, where a great knife was sticking after having pierced her through and through; "she is dead! The poor thing caught that knife which Little Thunder launched at me before I laid him out. And Arrow-Flight, too, see?" laying down one body to turn over the other; "altogether done for, with his head completely smashed in. Brother and sister, alike faithful and true to us, and dead almost at the same moment. Sad, sad, sad!"

It was as he said.

Louis Rameau paused over the dead body of the murdered girl, his dark face momentarily working, his Indian-like stoicism, or stolidity, for an instant shaken, by the distressing spectacle.

"A good little girl, Chuck-a-popee!" he said. "Ugh! Knew her since she was papoose. Had she lived, I would have married her. But the living are living, and the dead are dead. Ugh!" And he turned away.

Probably everybody has his individual way of mourning, no less than of love-making; this was the half-breed Louis Rameau's way. But who shall say that might not have been profounder than appeared on the surface? "Judge not, that ye be not judged," saith the Holy Book.

At this juncture there was a series of screams from the tepee, and the scouts rushed in a body in that direction.

Buffalo Bill was the first to enter, though a sudden outrush of several shrieking squaws almost upset him as he did so.

Then Miss Delmar, exclaiming: "Save her! save her! Oh, for God's sake!" fell, half fainting into his arms, and a terrible spectacle presented itself.

Big Knife, having in some way escaped serious harm in his tumble over the crag, was in the center of the abandoned tepee, a look of revengeful fury in his face, a bloody knife in his hand, his sister, Malk-wah-kee hanging, wounded to the death, over his left arm.

"So perish all traitresses!" howled the murderer. "I may lose my fair white love, but not without my revenge upon the false sister whose treachery lost her to me."

And, simultaneously flinging aside the knife and dropping his piteous burden, he snapped a pistol at Cody's head, dashed through the side of the tepee, and disappeared.

"Follow him—hunt him down—shoot him dead!" shouted Buffalo Bill, as his followers came hurrying in. "Promises to the contrary are wiped out now. Oh, woe, woe!" And, shifting his fainting burden to Buckskin Jack's support, he hurried to where the wounded little lame medicine woman had already struggled to her knees, and was stretching out her arms toward him.

"White Chief Bill!" she whispered, with a smile as he raised her in his strong embrace; "I can tell you now—I am not ashamed now."

"Tell me now!" he exclaimed, his stern voice trembling in spite of himself. "Do not talk thus, my poor girl! What do you mean?"

"Speak low, and bend a little closer—there!" The faint whisper was growing still fainter. "White Chief Bill!"

"Yes?"

"You remember that there was one thing on earth I wished for, more than to be a healer among the whites, a doctor—one thing more than anything else?"

"Yes, yes!"

"You don't even now guess what it was?"

"I don't know—that is—oh, my poor child! Well, what was it then?" desperately.

"Your love!" the last smile brightening even as it faded and fluttered away. "Oh, I love you so dearly, so dearly!"

He could make no answer.

"White Chief Bill!" he could hardly hear the whisper now.

"Yes, yes!" with a sort of groan, his great heart was so full of pity for her.

"Just once! Let me—let me only dream that you—that you kissed me before I died!"

Without a word, he pressed his lips reverently to the poor upturned brow.

And then, with a slight movement, she was suddenly limp, a dead weight, lifeless and cold, in his arms.

Poor Malk-wah-kee! It was like enough not the lover's kiss that her dreary life had craved. But then she had her own little romance, after all, and it was not without its denouement of sympathy and tenderness. And there are so many heart-hungers that starve on to the end, without even this much.

Laying the body gently upon a couch of skins, Buffalo Bill was at once his stern, energetic self again, the man of action and resource.

"Quick! to the corral!" he exclaimed, rushing past Miss Delmar, who was by this time sufficiently recovered to be on her feet, most of his men having already rushed out in pursuit of Big Knife. "Courage, ma'am! and come on! This is no place for you!"

When he got outside, Louis Rameau, lariat in hand, was already in the corral, selecting animals for the flight.

Buckskin and Yankton, still hesitating to fire against orders, were drawing a bead on the fugitive Big Knife, who was fleeing toward the village on foot.

"If we might only just wing him, colonel!" they cried. "Otherwise, he'll get ter ther camp before us, an' give the alarm, in any case."

"It must not be!" exclaimed Cody. "Wait!" he snatched from the ground a bow and quiver, probably dropped there by one of the panic-stricken squaws. "This is worth the trial!"

The quiver contained a single arrow, which he promptly notched to the string, and, drawing it to the head, let fly after the fugitive, by this time half-hidden by the falling snow, having the satisfaction of seeing him stagger and stoop, apparently putting his hand to the calf of his leg, after which he disappeared.

"Ha! we shall doubtless beat him to the village, at all events. Here, you, Buckskin, drive back those squalling women into the tepee! Yankton, help Louis in the corral. There ought to be plenty of saddles and bridles in yonder corral lodge, too. I will look to that myself."

These things were executed with the utmost dispatch, though it was longer than the master-scout could have wished when the five requisite broncos were finally brought out, with such gear as the place provided, which was only better than nothing for white men, though an Indian would have found little fault with either one of the equipments.

"Dear young lady, no time is to be lost, and you perceive the extent of our accommodations. Can you ride man-fashion?"

The words were hurriedly addressed by Buffalo Bill to Miss Delmar, as they stood together beside the best sheepskin-saddled pony of the appropriated group.

Pallid from the recent tragic scene, but still comely and lady-like in the disfiguring half-squaw costume which she had latterly been compelled to assume, as her squaw associates despoiled her of her garments and jewels proper, one after another, Blanche—it must be remembered that she had not even had the opportunity of thanking her rescuers yet—could only bite her lip and cast down her eyes, in an agony of maidenly distress.

"No, sir, no!" she faltered. "I—I have never done such a thing in my life."

"Pardon me, ma'am, but the beginning must be made. Your hand, if you please, and now—your foot."

It was done in an instant, and the young lady had to confess to herself that she was more comfortable in the saddle-seat than she could have had any idea of.

Then her rescuers swung themselves simultaneously upon their mounts, and all were off at a gallop, leaving their dead, friend and foe alike, to the mercy of the pitiless wintry waste behind them.

The distance to the fortified village was about half accomplished when three flaring torches were seen to fly up in the air, one after the other.

"The signal!" exclaimed Cody. "We are safe!"

But not wholly so.

True, as they dashed through a part of the camp in the direction of the pass, a few minutes later, the ghost ring was wholly deserted, and Boss Fakir Potter, howling and gesticulat-

ing, was leading his dancers and the mob of attendant spectators far out and beyond.

But at the same time Big Knife, bare-back on a picked-up scarecrow of a pony, came plunging in among the tepees from an unexpected direction, whooping out the alarm at the top of his voice.

CHAPTER XVII.

OUT AND AWAY, BUT AGAIN AT BAY.

"Straight for the top of the descent, remember that!" coolly commanded Buffalo Bill. "Never mind that calf's bawling."

At the same time both he and Buckskin hazarded a snap-shot at the unlooked-for disturber of the peace, but with no more result than to bring his horse to the ground, while he still kept vociferating the alarm, and to some purpose at that.

The top of the pass was reached, indeed, but not before a hundred or more infuriated young bucks, with Short Bull and Kicking Bear at their head, came rushing back to the tepees for their guns, while at least a dozen guards had remained true to their posts at different intervals down the zigzag precipitous descent. "Take the young lady down the slope, all of you!" called out the master-scout, in his clear, cool voice. "I will hold the head of the pass here unaided, until you shall have fought your way to the bottom."

Hold the head of the pass against that demon multitude, and alone?

However, they obeyed, without a protest—Miss Delmar had looked out in simple astonishment, altogether too great for utterance—and a moment later, without turning his head, he heard them thundering a break-neck gallop down the zigzag descent exchanging a dozen shots for one with the sentinels as they rode.

Then the Indian mob came surging toward the lone defender of the pass in a mad wave, some with guns, others without, yelling like fiends, the glare of the camp-fires about the ghost ring lighting up their savage, passion-distorted features with a demoniac glow. Some shots were also discharged at him on the instant, but he seemed to bear a charmed life against them.

Then, all of a sudden, he opened out upon them with his Winchester. Buffalo Bill at bay, and with his magazine gun in good working order! Could more be said with regard to the operation and result.

In five minutes, or less, they melted away under the stream of balls with which he swept their ranks, like a suddenly exposed snow-bank to the full hour of a midsummer sun.

He sought in vain for Big Knife as a special target, but, after kicking up the rumpus, that villain had either taken care to keep out of sight, or was lost in the general crowd.

As for the more prominent chiefs, such as Short Bull, Kicking Bear, *et al*, the master-scout, in view of Two-Strike's important promise to him, the master-scout had no desire to increase the acerbities of the situation by bringing down one of them.

Having driven back the mob of hostiles (the ghost-dance, by the way, was being kept up, further on toward the end of the plateau, in all its extravagance and vigor), he turned and looked down the steep.

The scouts, with the young lady in their charge, appeared to have reached the bottom and the plains, without suffering material damage, though Louis Rameau's left arm seemed to be hanging at his side in an unnatural manner, as if he might have been winged; while behind them, on the various stages of the descent, were eight or ten of the guards motionless or writhing upon the ground, their comrades, of about the same number, dancing about them and howling for revenge.

Buffalo Bill paused but a moment. Then waving his hand to his party on the plain, he gave rein to his pony, and dashed down the steep, loosening out a stream of bullets, right and left, from his faithful Winchester, as he flew.

It was like the passage of a meteor, or the chute or a lava-torrent down a volcano's side.

He reached the bottom unscathed, but only to have his bronco fall dead beneath him, pierced by numerous balls.

However, five or six ponies, whose saddles he had summarily emptied in his downward flight, were already clattering after him down the steep; so that to lariat one of these and mount it was but the work of a moment, after which he coolly galloped out over the plain to rejoin his friends.

"Oh, sir! we feared you were lost to us," exclaimed Miss Delmar, with much simplicity, her heart in her throat, or in her eyes, as the case might be. "Or, at least, I did."

"Ah, my dear miss!" responded the master-scout, gayly; "I am perhaps too big and too old to be so lost as not to be found again, without the public bellman's assistance."

Then they all started in a hand-gallop across the plain, with

the secret valley as their primary objective point; though, before they reached the farther side, upward of a hundred hostiles were observed in as mad a pursuit.

"Direct for the fissure-entrance—not for the outer precipice again!" shouted Buffalo Bill, leading the way into a deep valley-trail, other than the one from which the party had issued under the boss-fakir's guidance. "We can speedily clear out the crevice, so as to communicate with Red Tomahawk, while it would never do to give those scoundrels the clew to Job Potter's cavern-retreat."

Miss Delmar was riding at his elbow, and, as they dashed along the trail, he took advantage of the fleeting opportunity to explain the situation to her, besides speaking of her aunt, her lover, Mr. Travers, and many other things that could not but be of intense interest.

"Poor dear Aunt Deborah!" exclaimed Blanche at last; "how she must have suffered on my account, with her proud temper and sensitive nature! And then the idea of Tom Travers being there at the Agency, too. He is really a dear, brave, gallant fellow, I can assure you, Mr. Cody, for all of what you may have thought of—of his rather ultra-Britishism, you know."

"Haven't a doubt of it, ma'am," returned the master-scout, sympathetically. "There's no braver, stancher man on earth than your bang-up Englishman—unless it may be here in America—and, if they're a trifle tender in the feet at times, they more than make it up in sand and enterprise. It's the sort that has conquered, or is still conquering, the whole unexplored world."

Miss Delmar evidently thought this speech very kind of the colonel; but, for all that, when she spoke again it was on a less cheerful subject.

"The fate of that poor girl, Malk-wah keel!" she exclaimed, with sobs in her voice. "I had known of her worth and talents at the Agency, was going to do what I could to give her a chance, and now—oh, it is a nightmare only to think of it!"

"Then try to think of something else, ma'am," counseled Cody, almost roughly; and there was a new depth and feeling in his voice, as he added, almost inaudibly: "Or, rather, there are somethings, deeply enough felt, that are better left forever unsaid."

The trail was a difficult one, and before it was half-covered, the whooping clamor of the pursuers could be heard with growing distinctness, as it echoed and reverberated among the wild rocks.

However, they reached the fissure-entrance, still choked with its heaps of Indian dead from the previous fight, and at once took possession of its improvised but practically impregnable defenses; where Louis and Buckskin remained with Buffalo Bill and the young lady on guard, while Yankton went into the fissure with a torch for the purpose of communicating with Red Tomahawk, and doing what might be done toward clearing out the obstructions.

Louis had received a severe bullet wound in the fleshy part of the left forearm, and was suffering great pain, though of course without complaint.

Miss Delmar, however, had fortunately had no little hospital experience, and, water being handy, it was not long before she succeeded in laving and binding up the hurt, after which the brave half-breed seemed much more comfortable.

It was now long past midnight, the snow having ceased to fall; the weather clear and cold.

But the party were probably safe enough for the present in their cramped retreat. The hostiles had evidently had quite enough experience of that fissure-entrance. At all events, now, after one hesitating attack, which was easily enough beaten off, they contented themselves with gathering on either side, well out of range, where they kept up their clamor incessantly.

At daylight Yankton returned to them, accompanied by Red Tomahawk himself.

They had not yet quite cleared out the passage enough to admit of horses being brought through, but they could soon have all clear, and Red Tomahawk brought with him an ample supply of coffee and meat, freshly cooked by himself to answer the demands of the occasion, and which proved most acceptable, as may well be believed.

They remained but a short time, and then returned to their task.

Red Tomahawk had reported having passed the night, for the most part, without being disturbed, though at one time the squaws in the valley had endeavored to overawe him by threatening an attack, which, however, he had easily disposed of.

As daylight grew apace, the hostiles seemed to increase in numbers and audacity in the vicinity of the fissure-opening, and once again they made an attempt at a combined attack, which, however, was readily repulsed, with a loss of several of their

number, by the deadly Winchesters of the three men holding the place.

"That was like a feint," observed Buffalo Bill, when the demonstration was over. "I don't half like it."

"Neither do I," said Buckskin, while Louis merely shook his head.

"What worse is there to fear?" promptly demanded Miss Delmar. "I insist on knowing, my friends, and assure you of my capacity to bear up against any unpleasant thought you may be keeping from me."

"You ought to know it, ma'am, and you shall," replied Colonel Cody, gravely. "The enemy may use kegs of gunpowder; that is the long and short of it. They've used it before in this very place, and they may use it again."

The young woman paled a little, but kept her nerve admirably.

"In that case," she said, with a faint smile, "I suppose it would be all up with us, so they say."

"Oh, no; not at all!" cried Buffalo Bill, while his companions were profuse in their reassuring nods and grins. "We could still have the interior valley to fall back on; and to smoke us out of that they'd have to mine and blow up the whole mountain here."

But, notwithstanding this, Yankton at this moment reappeared, and beckoned to the master-scout with a certain startled look in his face which caused the latter to hasten toward him.

"Be on the alert, you two!" he called out a moment later; "and at the first intimation of mining, come right back into the valley with Miss Delmar. I shall be absent with Yankton for a short time."

But Miss Delmar, taking fresh alarm, at once hurried toward him.

"Why let me wait here at all, Mr. Cody, if the interior valley is so safe?" she said. "Let me go with you now."

"Miss Delmar," replied the great scout, evasively, but firmly, "ask no questions, but remain just where you are. I not only beseech, but command it."

She bowed her head submissively, and he hurried away.

Yankton's only previous words to Buffalo Bill had been these: "There's the duse to pay inside!" and so there was, in the limited terrestrial sense.

The hostiles had gained possession of the westward-looking precipice wall from the outside, and were seen to be fairly swarming along its crest and the half-way ledge communicating through the cliff with Job Potter's cavern cell. They had already fired upon Red Tomahawk, though fortunately without effect, while the latter was driving the pack mule and animals (which had all been put in readiness for the trail, even including the packing of the Sibley tent) into the fissure, which had by this time been cleared out; and they might at any time drop down into the valley at their leisure, of course, at risk of being picked off, one by one, from the face of the cliff, though this hardly rendered the case much less desperate for the scouts.

"How could they have discovered the outer-cliff pathway leading up there?" were Cody's first words, on his taking in the new and startling situation. "By Jupiter! I have it. They must have tracked Potter thither, and tumbled to his prodigious ghost-faking swindle at last."

The query was answered and the conjecture verified at the same instant, and that right speedily.

A body was thrown over from the mid-cliff ledge a few minutes later, and the three scouts, hugging the bases of the crags around to where it had fallen, had no difficulty in recognizing the corpse as that of Mr. Job Potter, reformed gambler, itinerant crank, bogus Messiah, and, doubtless, irreclaimable scoundrel at large, still in the ridiculous ghost-dancing masquerade, magnificently tomahawked, and with the throat cut from ear to ear.

"No doubt the poor devil deserved it," commented Buffalo Bill, with commendable brevity; "but don't let us forget that he welcomed us hospitably, and did us a splendid service. Come on, now; let us get out of this."

Hurrying back to the egress, into which the animals had fortunately been driven, as has been mentioned, a chain of hostiles were perceived making their way already down the cliff.

Instantly, there was the repeated crack of three Winchesters, and as many as composed the links of the human chain were picked off, as dead Indians, almost as quickly as it takes to tell about it.

"Good enough!" observed the leader. "At this rate, one man stationed here can keep 'em out of the entire valley—at least as live Indians—with the most perfect ease. Tom, we're all snug in the fissure now, and this shall be your special duty, old fellow."

"Hold on!" cried Yankton, as there were the reports of several rifles, while as many bullets knocked off chips of rocks about

their heads. "Ther infernal foxy hounds is already in the valley! Look!"

A dozen Indians or more were marching straight across from the squaws' tepees, in which, after secretly dropping down from the height, they might have been in hiding for an hour or more, whooping and firing, while yet another living chain was seen letting itself down, link by link, along the face of the crag.

"No use; they've got the valley," growled Cody. "The fissure here is all that is left us, but we can speedily keep them out of this end of it."

Hurrying back into the fissure, the trio lost no time in undoing Yankton's work of a few hours previous—that is, by blocking the way behind them, by tumbling down fresh masses of rock.

But this task was hardly finished when Buckskin's voice was heard bawling back through the passage.

"Colonel!" he yelled, "hurry up with yer orders. Ther devils air gitting ready to blow us up."

The master-scout hurried past the animals to the front, with the two others.

Just as they came out behind the little barricade, a keg of powder, which, with a lighted fuse in it, the Indians were trying to push into the fissure-mouth with long poles, exploded prematurely, killing or mangling a dozen or more of them, but without harming the defenders in the least.

CHAPTER XVIII.

SEEING THE THING THROUGH.

"They'll have to do better than that to smoke us out," observed Buffalo Bill, with his accustomed coolness. "However, be on the lookout, men. They'll be likely to hazard another assault under cover of this infernal smoke, and——"

He was cut short by a chorus of diabolical yells, like pandemonium unloosed, and then they did come charging in under the thick-hanging sulphurous cloud, in swarming scores, their guns popping, their knives and tomahawks agleam.

Unnerved in spite of her determination not to be so, Blanche Delmar screamed, and shrank far back into the passage.

The master-scout, however, reassured her as pleasantly as if in a drawing-room, and then the five Winchesters opened out with their torrents of death, rolling back the column of fiends like shriveling parchment, though several of their dead were left lying across the very breastwork, so near had the assault come to carrying it.

But, in spite of this temporary success, Buffalo Bill had to confess to himself that—penned up as they were, front and rear, in the narrow fissure itself—the situation was a very precarious one, and momentarily growing more and more desperate; and it was easy to see that his fellow-adventurers shared his thoughts, though all were alike cheerful and painstaking in concealing their discouragement from their fair young charge.

However, the relief that was no less longed for than unexpected was near at hand.

In the first place, the besiegers soon again began to assay the blowing-up operation, and were slowly poling and lariatting another fuse-lighted keg of powder into the opening, when an unexpected lurch of the latter caused several of the Indians, Big Knife among them, to tumble and sprawl forward within momentary line of the deadly Winchesters.

"This is for a certain lame little squaw that—went before," muttered Buffalo Bill, between his teeth. "Big Knife, my brave, the happy or unhappy hunting-grounds are just pining for you."

His rifle cracked at the same instant, and the murderer of Malk-wah-kee was a corpse.

The other scouts also fired, killing the rest of the sprawlers before a single one of them could scramble out of range.

Then the smoking keg of powder in sight exploded prematurely, like its predecessor, but this time with more damage to the defenses than the besiegers, for a great fragment of rock at one side was loosened and rolled away by the concussion, thus materially widening the opening, and increasing the chances of a successful assault to a corresponding degree.

Buffalo Bill set his teeth hard as the savages were plainly heard making ready for another combined assault under and through the curtain of powder-smoke, and for the first he began to apprehend that the desperate game was, most likely, about up.

"Be ready for 'em!" he called out in his deep, commanding voice, but which, nevertheless, might well have had a ring of hopelessness in it.

"Steady an' true!" yelled Buckskin; "hyer they come!"

But no; there was, indeed, the howl of onset, there was the steady tramp of moccasined feet preceding the final rush; they

could almost see again the glitter of weapons, the flash of savage eyes; and then—there was a thundering clamor of horses' hoofs, a ringing soldierly cheer, responded to by an exasperated yell, and it seemed that an avalanche of horsemen, with clattering sabers and jingling spurs, were rushing down the trail before the fissure mouth, sweeping everything before it into ruin and nothingness.

Buckskin was the first to spring out through the dust and smoke.

"Hurrah!" he shouted. "Colonel Henry's black cavalry, an' knockin' ther spots out of 'em, right an' left!"

It seemed too good to be true, and Miss Delmar, who had borne up so bravely in the hour of extremest peril, was nigh to fainting under the joyful revulsion, but it was the truth, for all that.

As the party hurried out upon the open trail once more, not a hostile was within easy gunshot, but the brave negro troopers could be seen pursuing and shooting and cutting them down in the neighboring valleys to the westward without mercy.

The scouts lost no time in getting under way with their own original outfit, and, with their happy charge among them, were speedily leaving the ill-omened secret valley far behind them, and making tracks out of the Bad Lands as fast as their well-recuperated animals could carry them.

It was high noon when they halted for their first camping-ground, and first drew free breath, as it were, on a tall rounded butte well out of the accursed, but affording a splendid lookout back over it, as well as pretty much everywhere else.

There was not a sign of any further pursuit of them on the part of the hostiles, so that they might continue their way to the Agency with easy minds.

A little later on, a long and motley Indian procession was seen winding its way into the Bad Lands by a trail far to the northward.

"It's Red Cloud and his people!" exclaimed Buffalo Bill, taking an observation with his field-glass. "So the feeble old chief has at last yielded to the war-songs of his squaw, no less than the clamorings of his young men, with hothead Jack Red Cloud at their head, and is off to join the hostiles with his entire kith and kin! Well, it's no private concern of ours just now, and we can still hope that Colonel Henry and his black regiment may yet intercept them before they can reach the plateau."

Such interception was not made, however, though Red Cloud was soon back to the Agency again of his own inclination, and heartily tired of his bargain; nearly his entire tribe straggling and dribbling piecemeal back in his wake, after indescribable hardships and sufferings.

The expedition got back to Pine Ridge the evening of that same day, without further interruption.

Mrs. Jernyngham received her niece with open arms, Mr. Tom Travers was detected beyond measure, though still suffering with a very tender foot; the desperate adventures of the heroic scouts were soon the talk and boast of the place in both civil and military circles; and we may be assured that even Louis Rameau, with his canny love of the almighty dollar subsequently had no cause to complain of the rich Eastern lady's liberality in compensating the members of the memorable expedition that had fought so hard, suffered so greatly, and succeeded so admirably—literally plucking the mead of victory out of the nettle-fringed abysses of danger, despair and death.

Mrs. Jernyngham, with her niece and Mr. Travers, started for her Eastern home on the very next day following upon Miss Delmar's restoration to society, and we are told by good authority that the young couple were united in marriage on last St. Valentine's Day.

All of the rebellious chiefs and their followers have 'come in' from the Bad Lands since the departure of our heroine, and a permanent peace with the Indians is now most likely assured. But few appreciate how much this desirable state of affairs was brought about by the influence of one man with old Two-Strike, the head and front of the offending in the recent troubles.

That man, we need scarcely say, was the modest chief hero of the foregoing remarkable adventures, but whose fame is so secure that it needs not even this record to fasten upon it the royal seal of *ne plus ultra*—Buffalo Bill.

[THE END.]

GENTLEMAN JOE'S RANCH RAIDERS; or, HOLDING UP THE BIG FOUR," by the Author of "Gentleman Joe," will be published in the next number (389) of the LOG CABIN LIBRARY.

GENTLEMAN JOE'S RANCH RAIDERS;

OR,

HOLDING UP THE BIG FOUR.

By the Author of "GENTLEMAN JOE."

CHAPTER I.

RED RAPIDS WAKES UP.

"So this is Red Rapids!"

"This is Red Rapids!"

The first speaker turned quickly, as if he had been smitten from the rear.

He found himself confronted by an awkward-looking young fellow, with one shoulder several inches higher than the other, one cheek bulging out with a huge quid of tobacco, a green patch over one eye, and one ear several sizes larger than the other one.

Joseph Gentry, so much better known as Gentleman Joe, had seen many queer specimens in his day, but none queerer in face and general make-up than this one.

They were standing on the platform of a small and nearly deserted railway station.

The hour was ten o'clock, and the passenger train from which Joseph Gentry had alighted had just plunged into the darkness out over the monotonous rolling plain.

The station stood at the side of a sleepy little prairie town called Red Rapids.

Never did the town appear more sleepy than at ten o'clock, for generally it was a place of well-regulated habits which is one way of saying that its inhabitants were "early to bed and early to rise."

"Are you a citizen of the town?" Gentry asked, after he had sized up the awkward-looking youth.

"I reckon," was the laconic reply.

"And have been for some time, I take it?"

"About four year. I work around the station building a-heavin' freight and sich. The old man is away to-day, so I'm doin' the whole business of the shebang."

The young fellow seemed to be somewhat puffed up by the importance of his duties. He was grinning slightly on one side of his mouth after the general one-sidedness of the whole of his anatomy.

"Have you a decent hotel here?" Gentry asked.

"There ain't but one. So ye'll have to take that one unless you want to put up at one of them boarding-houses. There's a place right yonder where they chuck hash if that would suit ye."

"I am not after hash-chucking to-night—I want lodgings. The train stopped for refreshments a few hours ago, and it's sleep more than food that I want now. But since you seem to be well posted, perhaps you can tell me about somebody that I want to find."

"If he's anybody that's been here twenty-four hours I reckon I can tell ye about him."

"And while you're about it," Gentleman Joe continued, "what's the matter with telling me your name?"

"Bilks—Ben Bilks. And the old man's name is Ben Bilks, too; so they have given me sort of a nickname."

The one-sided grin was more pronounced than ever as he uttered this remark.

"And what may be the common handle you go by? It might be that I would want to refer to you in some way?"

"Half-and-Half is what they call me."

"I reckon I can see the point to that," smiled Gentleman Joe. "So, Mr. Bilks, if you know anything about a badly-used up cowboy who has been hanging around Red Rapids for the last few months, I reckon it would be doing me a favor if you would tell me what you know about him."

"Is his name Dargie?" Bilks asked.

"Maybe that's what he calls himself here. But how does this Dargie look?"

"Short, stumpy, one eye put out, and generally stove-up."

"I reckon you have sized him up. And is he here now, sure?"

"He was right here not more than half an hour ago. He's always hangin' round where there's something exciting goin' on which there ain't much here at Red Rapids. I have lived here a good while, and it seems as if it grew slower every year. They don't build no new houses, though there are a few tumbles down every year, and some of them are getting drifted in with sand. My old man's house—"

"I don't know as I care so much about your private residence, but if you could tell me about this man and where he lives, it might be of some value to me."

"He stops mostly over to the place where I told you before that they chucked hash."

"And he would be likely to be there now?"

"As likely as anywhere. They sell some pizen there at that caravansary, although the saloon business on the whole is rather slow here at Red Rapids. Most of the people here have signed the pledge, and even the river water is too strong for some of them. But, see here, mister, did your train run through a cattle herd just before she got in here?"

"I reckon so. It was so dark that I couldn't see much, but the train had to slow up once, and the porter said something about the track being blocked up by cattle. They thought that it was a little queer, for this is a little off from a regular ranch."

"That's just what I thought," said Bilks. "But I saw some hide and hair on the cow-catcher of that engine, and I reckoned that something that had hoofs had got h'isted off the track. But I guess ye'll find that stove-up cow-puncher out at that caravansary all right. But he ain't no good to hire, if that's what you're after. He's too stiff in the j'int to tumble off a bronco often enough."

Gentleman Joe felt that he had now obtained about all the important points from Bilks on this subject that the latter was capable of imparting. After a minute more, the Gilt-Edged Sport, looking out of place amid such prosy surroundings, stepped off the station platform, walked along the track for a short distance, and then struck out upon the principal street of the sleepy town which ran at right angles with the railway track.

It was a cloudy evening, with a moon behind the clouds, so that it was not so dark as it otherwise would have been.

Indeed, objects on the street were distinct enough—in fact, the grayish gloom lent an exaggerated appearance to the shape and size of the most common objects.

It was not difficult for Gentry to find the place where, as Bilks expressed it, they "chucked hash."

The house was a two-story affair, with a creaking sign over the door. And Gentleman Joe, approaching the door, took the trouble to read the sign.

As he did so, two men came out, one of them short, stout, and with only one eye.

And Gentry knew that he had run squarely across the very man that he had started out to find.

He would even have accosted the fellow then, but at that instant there were sounds along the street of the town which, considering its quietness, were quite startling.

First the dull thump of hoof-beats, then a pistol shot, and then several shouts.

The hoof-beats continued to approach the spot where Gentleman Joe and those who had come out of the chief hotel were standing.

They could already see the horseman riding up the street at a breakneck pace, while windows along the street were thrown up and the inmates of the houses, in night attire, thrust out their heads.

At the same time strange, startling cries sounded on the air, and various figures could be seen rushing up the road in pursuit of the horseman.

What it was about the latter to attract such attention was not at first clear to those standing in front of the boarding-house.

But suddenly from the lips of one to whom as yet Gentleman Joe had not vouchsafed so much as a glance, came an ejaculation of consternation.

"By the powers of mud!—it looks like the devil himself, minus head and horns!"

The horseman was then almost opposite the hotel. Two men, one of them being the "stove-up" cowboy, called Dargie, rushed out into the middle of the road directly in front of the animal.

The latter seemed exhausted from its long race, and was ready enough to give it up and come to a halt.

Then it was that Gentleman Joe obtained a clear, full view of the figure on its back.

It leaned slightly forward in its saddle, the hands gripping the reins with almost spasmodic tightness, the feet in the stirrups, yet its position was somewhat peculiar, and Gentry was the first to notice that the rider was bound to the saddle with ropes.

Then it was that his gaze wandered upward, and these words burst from his lips:

"Great God!—the horseman is minus a head!"

CHAPTER II.

SANDY.

"Where's the head that fits that 'ere neck?—that's the question!"

These words were uttered by Dargie, the ex-cowboy.

All the sleepy town of Red Rapids had fully waked up.

Men with trousers and shirts, but without shoes or stockings, rushed out of doors and raced up the street toward the spot from every direction.

A little more particular in their attire, women were beginning to appear upon the street, and cries of horror and astonishment rang from many pairs of lips.

The ropes that bound the mysterious horseman had been cut, and the body eased to the ground.

Then it was found that a casual glance given the strange object was less horrifying than a closer inspection of it proved to be.

It was the body of a man of medium size, and clad in the attire of a herdsman.

He possessed no weapons, and it was evident that in life he had been a man of fine physique.

So tightly did the fingers grip the reins that it was with difficulty that their grasp could be loosened for the fingers had already begun to stiffen.

The head of the mysterious horseman was surely missing. And a more startling or horrifying spectacle than the stump of the neck, horribly mutilated, it would be impossible to imagine or describe.

And the words which burst from the lips of Dargie, the ex-cowboy, were in substance echoed by many others who at that moment looked upon the strange spectacle.

"Well, I declare, I have seen in me day many specimens of what they call sawed-offs. But I'll solemnly tell the court that I niver heard of their shortening a man at the top ind!"

At the sound of that voice, and those words, Gentleman Joe started as if a thunderbolt had exploded close behind his ears.

The next moment he was peering into the face of the speaker, and the next moment after that, the two were clasping hands in silence and almost fiercely.

"It isn't Gentleman Joe, is it? It can't be in such a sleepy, sand-buried, out-of-the-way, augerish sort of a place? And yit I believe my eyes aren't deceiving me, for it's just like ye to come by appointment to meet such an object as the one that lies yonder."

"Why, it's Sandy!" exclaimed Gentleman Joe.

The other deftly flung out one fat hand and touched the lips of Gentleman Joe lightly with the back of it.

"Hist, will ye! I don't want ye to be too glib with that name in this town, even if it is a sleepy one!" Sandy exclaimed.

"Why, what is the matter with you? And how happens it that you're here, anyhow?"

"It all happened easy enough. I rode here on the back of a tired sort of an animal called a horse. I rode four days and four nights, and I took a little slape, and less of food, in the time. I didn't intend to strike any town for

three or four days longer, but since I ran smack into this one I was that hungry that I couldn't stand it any longer. Me flesh weakened, and I yielded to the demands of the inner man."

These last remarks were spoken on both sides in subdued voices.

The two had withdrawn a little from the crowd which was huddling about that object lying there in the street.

There was such a jumble of voices and ejaculations on all sides that there was little danger of anything being overheard that passed between Sandy and Gentleman Joe.

As for Sandy, those who have read some earlier tales of the career of Gentleman Joe cannot fail to recognize in him a sturdy, witty, blackguard of a lawyer, who could talk very good English, but who more frequently relapsed into quite a liberal use of the brogue in ordinary speech.

He was always known by the name of Sandy, and although he had another name, he took such good care to keep it out of sight, that he made many friends and acquaintances who could not have told what it was if they had been asked.

Sandy had originally come from the city of Chicago.

That he had made a record there of two kinds, Gentleman Joe well knew.

One-half of that record was a good one. For with a skill and quickness to catch the finest law points and tricks it would have been hard to find a more successful man than Sandy, even in the great and growing city of Chicago where he began his career.

When Sandy got a client, however, he showed a persistence and determination in his work for that client's interest which sometimes in a measure shifted the burden of trouble from the client's shoulders to those of Sandy himself.

That the Irishman was always scrupulous in his manner of carrying points may well be doubted.

And thereby hangs the story of Sandy's misfortune which made it not only convenient but necessary for him to seek new fields for the practice of his wits.

Thus it was that he had gone to the western mines and mountains and fallen in with Gentleman Joe.

Generous, warm-hearted, bluff to a fault, Sandy never learned enough by experience to keep him from getting into new difficulties.

It had been some time since Gentleman Joe had seen him at all.

The last time they had been together was in the mountain regions, and therefore neither expected to meet the other under conditions so foreign to their former associations.

"But that isn't explaining, Sandy, why you took a long and lonely ride instead of buying a railway ticket and getting into a train as civilized people do where the railway trains run?"

The two men were standing face to face in front of the boarding-house, and the lantern which hung before the door was shedding all the light it was capable of shedding full upon them.

And Gentleman Joe, looking keenly into the face of his friend, saw that he looked more serious than was habitual to him.

"Can't a man have his troubles I would like to know?" Sandy asked, with a shrug.

"You always manage to have yours, Sandy, and if they don't come to you, you have a knack of going to them."

"Ye have got that right, Gentleman Joe. But I must say that this is one that came to me as it were. It isn't a brand new one, but an old one warmed over. It's something come up about that old Chicago affair that I had hoped was dead and buried long ago. I told ye something about that once, and it's the one thing that I like to speak about in a whisper when I speak of it at all."

"Are they following you up with that still?" Gentleman Joe asked, with some anxiety.

The continuation of "GENTLEMAN JOE'S RANCH RAIDERS," from where it stops here, will appear in the next number.



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